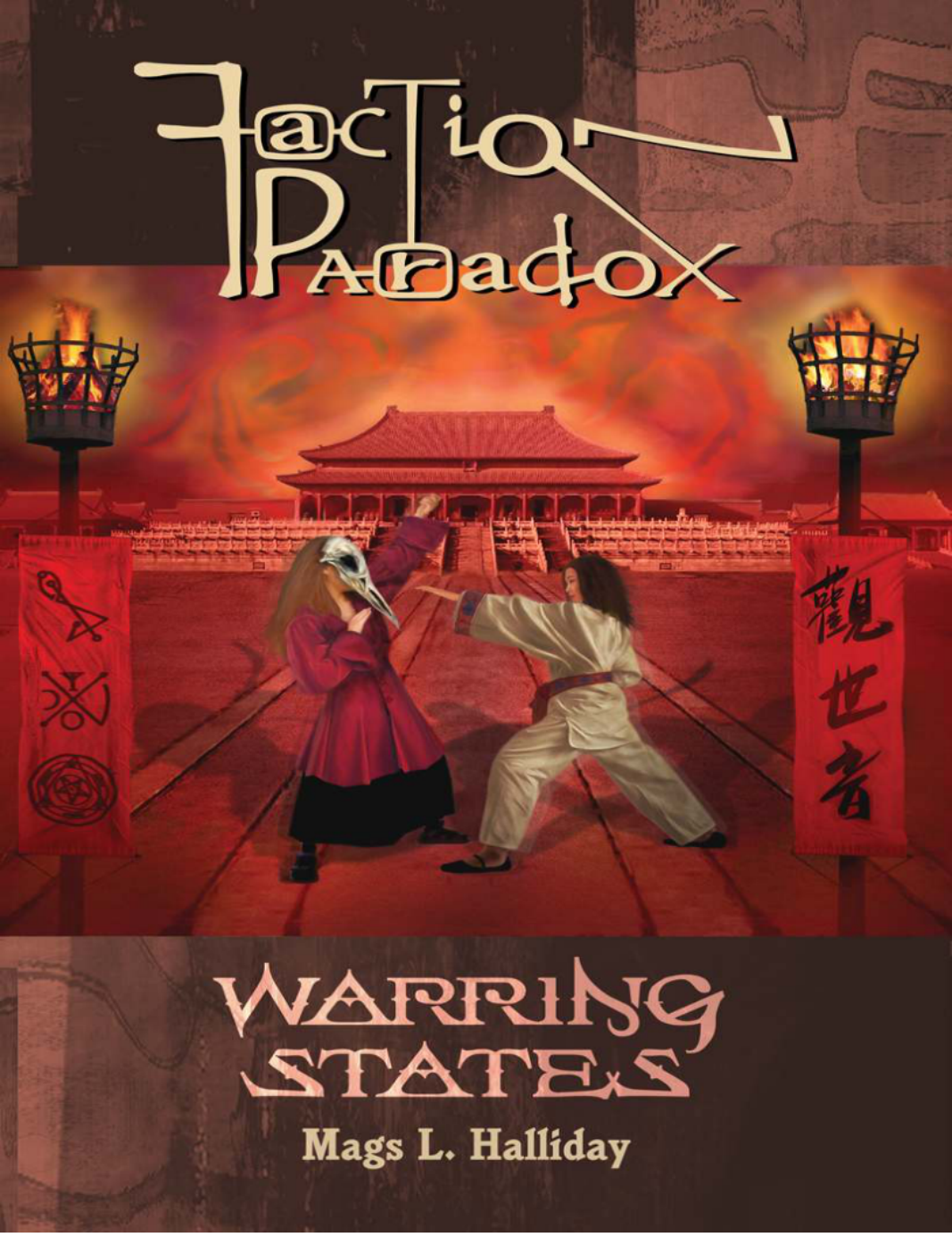
Faction Paradox
WARRING STATES
Mags L. Halliday

Faction Paradox: Warring States

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The Story So Far

The War. A conflict so primal that for most of the population of history, it can only be thought of as a "War in Heaven". Now in its forty-first year (at least from the point of view of those directly involved), but intersecting the continuum throughout the span of causality and across battle-lines too large to be recognised by non-combatants, it's a War that isn't just fought but re-written, re-defined and re-imagined with every confrontation. It is best described as a dispute over the territories of "cause" and "effect", and the participants include…

The Great Houses. The immovable, untouchable bloodlines which have - traditionally - been seen as responsible not only for the current structure of history but for the fact that history has a structure at all. Ancient, aristocratic and prone to in-fighting, it's enough to know that the Houses were there before anybody else, and that all other known cultures (humanity included) can be thought of as nth-generation copies. Great House technology goes some way beyond gross machinery, but the Houses are best-known for their timeships, although "ship" might be a misleading terms as these vessels are complex historical events in themselves and tend to look like people on the outside anyway. The War-time enemy of the Great Houses is the first recorded challenge to their authority, and even the fact that there is a War suggests that something has gone very, very wrong. (The exact nature of the enemy isn't relevant to this current story. The politics of the Houses themselves is hard enough to follow.)

Faction Paradox. The Fallen Angel among Great Houses, the bloodline which has consistently refused to follow the protocols of House society and which has been utterly rejected by the Houses' Homeworld as a result. Made up of renegades, ritualists, saboteurs and subterfugers, the Faction is now part criminal syndicate and part "family", the only bloodline to recruit the lesser species (humanity included) into its ranks… something the other Houses consider to be in remarkably bad taste. And since the other Houses insist on seeing themselves as immortal, basic death-cult imagery is common among the Faction's agents. Their masks are made from the skulls of things that shouldn't really have been born; their weapons are bonded to their shadows, not carried; and underneath it all is a philosophy that's as much about sacrifice as temporal theory. Since natural childbirth is as disgusting to the Houses as the thought of dying, Faction cells

throughout history - like many of Earth's voodoo-cults - tend to use family titles: the Cousins, the biggest part of the Faction's membership, are theoretically directed by the Mothers, Fathers, Godfathers and Godmothers who rule from the hidden parliament of the Eleven-Day Empire. Technically Faction Paradox is neutral in the War, meaning that it'll get in anybody's way if it wants to.

For more information about any of these subjects, see The Book of the War.

Book One: The Phoenix Dances

Chapter One

Cousin Octavia, strategist for the military chapter of the Eleven-Day Empire, scourge of the Thirteen-Day Republic, leader of the Red Burial and possessor of witchblood, stepped through the protective clouds and into a May afternoon in Peking, 1900. The engine's dirty steam stayed in determined shapes, holding as they expanded, as if unwilling to venture too far from the train.

She was thin for the age, despite it being close to her former life's time, with narrow hips and shoulders. Her cheekbones were a little too sharp, her green eyes a little too catlike, her chin a little too pointed. Altogether too angular. Back when she'd been a Victorian, she had often heard the suggestion that her pale skin was unhealthily pallid. Naturally, she'd taken to emphasising what one critic had called her "translucent, driven beauty". Even then she'd known that image mattered in ritual. For this mission she'd asked the image consultants to grow her three years' worth of long, fine fair hair over a weekend. They'd offered to program it to be naturally wispy and dishevelled, but she'd assured them that she could manage the odd bit of back-combing herself.

Despite the fresh day, despite the lack of chill in the air, she'd favoured black velvets and red silks. If she were going back to her old game of mysticism-on-demand, she had to dress the part. Now she stood on the platform of a clattering Peking railway station and absorbed the situation. The station was of blanched wood, cut when green and buffeted by sun and snow until it had become ghostly.

'Christ, I'd forgotten how this place stinks.' Cousin Ursula stepped down from the train carriage behind them. She was dressed, Octavia thought, as if she were about to attend a tennis party. Which they might actually be about to do, she realised with annoyance. Where Octavia was sombre in black and red, Ursula was all in creamy linen. White lace cascaded from her chest, a snowy waterfall emphasising her cinched-in waist. Leg-of-mutton sleeves with twenty tiny buttons on each wrist. A straight ankle-length skirt, held up slightly by a lace-gloved hand in case of mud. She had all the curves Octavia lacked. Where Octavia was fair, Ursula was *blonde*; brightly, whitely blonde. And she combined it with a peaches-and-cream complexion. Octavia suspected genetic surgery.

Cousin Ursula was a fixer. She set things up, or tidied away after them, or generally sorted them out. On the train, she'd been unable to stop straightening a crooked mirror that hung on the wall of their shared stateroom. Octavia rose each day to find it perfectly aligned

with the lines of the room, and would nudge it a little, just enough to be noticeable. Octavia didn't mind order; she understood that the human eye could spot something just a few sixteenths off and be driven mad by it, but she also knew that Ursula was from the Homeworld. Any human instinct was an affectation, an adopted signal. After four days and nights on the train, worming its way to a ghostly Peking station, Ursula had stopped straightening the mirror.

This wasn't the main station but a branch, lopped off before it had even grown. It was how the Faction Paradox train navigated the network; the cut branches, the abandoned stations, the stops which only existed in utopian urban planners' dreams. Yet despite its phantom status, the place was attracting people like flies to a corpse. They bowed and nodded furiously, pushing one another aside in their clatter to gain a few coins from the foreigners. Octavia realised that the smell came only partially from the tight-pressed bodies; there was a deeper, persistent stench here.

Even before the steam started to dissipate, Ursula was commanding some young local men to carry Octavia's luggage. Octavia had protested that she didn't need to bring any belongings. Ursula had stared at her. 'You're in the nineteenth century now, Cousin, and you *will* have baggage.'

So a heavy leather trunk, belted, braced and covered in stickers for places never visited, was loaded onto a cart along with an elderly khaki hold-all and a disturbing number of hatboxes. Ursula gestured to a rickshaw. 'It's a fair way to the Legation Quarter. Best get in.'

The coolies wore washed-out clothes, their muted colours obscured still more by layers of dust. Their rope-soled sandals smacked up clouds of pale dirt. There were no other buildings to be seen, just the tiny Western station with its neat wooden platform and giant clock. The landscape was just uneven scrub, and the rickshaw juddered over the unpaved road. It threaded and wove through foot traffic, overtaking slow-moving carts. Octavia clutched at her hat from an almost-forgotten instinct.

In front of them, approaching rapidly until then began to fill her whole gaze, were the walls. Dark grey, almost monolithic. The top, far above, was broken into a series of giant steps; ancient battlements, still ready to defend the inner cities. Looking to either side she could see great towers at each end, rising yet higher. Their eaves curved outwards, glinting in the sunshine. Ursula was leaning back nonchalantly in her own rickshaw, as if she rode about like this every day.

'Why is the station outside the city?' Octavia called, over the rising

noise of crowds.

'They didn't want evil foreign technology disrupting their energy lines. All that "put a three-legged toad by the door to bring you fortune" feng shui junk, but scaled up. Can't have this huge metal straight line coming all the way into the city.'

'What if the toad hopped away? Oh, I suppose that's why it's three-legged…'

Octavia could feel Ursula staring at her then. The fixer had made it clear, from the first day in Prester John's Westminster apartment, that she considered this entire mission a waste of precious resources. Cousin Ursula was a pragmatist, not a visionary. She didn't like tangents.

But the chi lines *did* limit the Faction's access-points to this world. That was, after all, why they'd had to use the train to get here.

Octavia looked up as the shadow of the wall fell over them, cutting out the warm spring sunlight. There was a gate, wide enough to take two trains, high as a two-storey house. Above it, the wall continued until the sky was hidden. Then they were inside a long, wide tunnel, murky and smelling of waste. Ursula was right about that, at least. The city stank.

Inside the walls they passed broad expanses planted with rows of fluttering trees; avenues of green leading up to scarlet-and-gold temples. Then streets lined with crowded shops and tea-houses. Passing an intersection, Octavia looked along a cross-street to see it lined thickly with banners and signs coated with Chinese script. The next side-street was hung with animal carcasses, the blood draining from still-quaking pigs into a noisome gully. In yet another, brightly-clad women were haggling with a stallholder over bolts of shimmering silks, whilst right next to them a dentist was tickling someone's eyeballs with a tiny ivory wand.

Most the buildings were wooden, with just the occasional wall enclosing a larger stone structure. Octavia called up the map of Peking stored in her eidetic memory implant. They'd just entered the Chinese City through the Yungtingmen. There'd be another wall ahead, another gateway, before they reached the Legation.

The traffic was slowing, then stopping. Up ahead there were raised voices, rapidly escalating in volume and speed. A farm cart from the south and a camel-train from the western deserts were slewed across the road, and the drivers were arguing the blame. A crowd was gathering, all offering their own opinions. There was laughter from above; looking up, Octavia saw men leaning out of the second storeys of the tea-houses, watching the argument delightedly.

Eventually, the road cleared and the coolies brought them to the Tartar Wall. It seemed as high again as the outer walls, darker, more austere. The gate, the Chienmen, was thick black iron, studded with nails as big as a man's fist. It closed in on them as they entered the inner Tartar City. Directly in front of them lay the Tiennimen, the gate to the Imperial City; red and gilt, covered in elaborate scrollwork. It was, of course, closed.

Then the rickshaws veered to the right, and suddenly Octavia was in Europe. High, anonymous stone walls lined the street. Lime trees offered shade to the promenaders in their pale skins, cream linen suits and muslin dresses. Turning again, they were carried through a gateway which Octavia could have sworn was identical to one in Whitehall. The British Legation, then.

A man in stiff-looking uniform hurried forwards and offered his hand to her as she stepped from the rickshaw. Ursula was already paying the coolies, haggling in Chinese. It was one of those annoying traits of the Homeworlders, which they'd refused to share with their human co-cultists: they could speak and understand any language from any world, any time. Octavia had to study just to order a meal in France.

The uniformed Westerner was ordering a young Chinese man forward, and suddenly the luggage was off again, being taken somewhere inside the Legation. Octavia looked about, noticing the mix of local and Western house design around the compound. Set back a little was a grand building in the imperial Chinese style, green tiles glinting on the roof. Ursula came over, looped her arm through Octavia's and smiled at the man in uniform. 'This is my cousin Miss Sutherland, Captain. She'll be staying with Miss Munroe while I go on.'

The captain saluted. He bowed over the back of Octavia's gloved hand, then harrumphed something about hoping her stay in Peking would be pleasant and about the Legations being a haven of civilisation in a heathen land. Octavia harrumphed something back about finding the city quite fascinating.

Ursula tugged lightly on her arm, 'Come, cousin, let me introduce you to Miss Munroe.'

As they crossed an open courtyard, with its notice-board and trees, Octavia glared at her. 'Who the hell is Miss Munroe?'

'You'll be fine. She's the daughter of some minor dignitary in the British Legation. Spends her time "doing good". The mother died a while back, and they don't like to talk about it. They think we're cousins, with me on the way to meet my husband in Australia. You're

reputed to be a medium, so I hope you've got your muslin ready to fake some ectoplasm.'

'What about Grieves? That's all that matters to me.'

'His wife's the suggestible type. You've been invited to dine with them this evening.'

The Grieves had taken a house in the Legation Quarter, but not within one of the diplomatic compounds. Stepping out of another rickshaw, with Miss Munroe following in one behind, Octavia was struck by the number of barriers set up about it. High whitewashed walls were broken only by solid gates, and though they were thrown open, the view of the courtyard beyond was hidden by the thick wooden screen placed a little way within. According to theory this spirit-gate was supposed to divert the chi, making the energy to flow in gentle waves instead of a forceful straight line. Along the front walls, though, there were posters. The thin paper was yellow from the paste that held them in place, and marked with the dark slashes of pictograms. Octavia couldn't read them, but she sensed the meaning.

Each word was another kind of screen, directing hostile forces towards the foreigners within the walls. She hesitated on the steps, aware of the ebb and flow about her. And of the snake-like guardians carved into the screen, which were - she was sure - watching her.

A Chinese servant was bowing at her, a deep bow straight from the waist. 'Miss Sutherland. The Grieves bid you welcome. Please, allow me to show you to them.'

That was sufficient invitation, and she stepped over the low wooden step, following the servant around the screen. Beyond was a wide paved courtyard, with a simple tree in each corner. Paper lanterns were strung between the branches, like giant glow-worms. Directly ahead was a two-storey building, with curling painted eaves. The wooden walls on the lower level had all been swung open to reveal the interior. Inside was a perfect Western dining room, lit by candelabra on a long table. Silverware glinted on the starched white linen cloth. Scattered around the courtyard were a number of people in formal evening wear; all of them turned as the servant bowed low again and announced her.

Octavia guessed that the woman hurrying forward would be Mrs Grieves. A classic upper-middle-class eccentric wife, her ordinariness not quite disguised by the trappings of Bohemia. The woman obviously thought of herself as having gone daringly native, in her purple silk dress and flat silk slippers. Her palm was slightly too warm when Octavia took it, clammy in a way that suggested nervousness.

Her eyes were preternaturally bright and large. Her ringlets were dressed to perfection, but bobbed nervously with her every breath. Octavia knew the type well: always convinced there was something else in the world, and far too liable to hand over cash to anyone with supposed mystical connections.

Everyone began the rituals of introduction, with Octavia dipping into slight curtseys at each proffered handshake, before they were led in to eat. Miss Munroe was arriving behind her, a Victorian beauty with simply-coiled brown hair and placid eyes. She could have been exploring the East End slums of London as easily as China, with the same simplistic confidence as she went about trying to improve other people's lives. She'd surprised Octavia when they'd first met at the Legation by pushing a bicycle and wearing a "rational dress", the ankle-length skirt discretely bifurcated. She'd changed into a long evening gown now.

Behind Miss Munroe came the Russian couple, Aleksandr Sorokin and wife. Both had dark hair and eyes; dapper in dress and manner, like natural diplomats. Aleksandr had an unsuitable moustache, in the belief that it gave his slim face gravitas. After them came Grieves himself. His face was deeply engraved with laughter-lines, the tanned skin stretched over its hollows. Fair hair, bleached by time and sun, fell over one eye. His palms were callused and he smelt of ink and dust. His voice was low and diffident, but had warm, strong tone which Octavia could imagine carrying across lecture halls and dig-sites. And following in his wake came Christién, Grieves' undergraduate assistant. He was young, probably *too* young for the kind of diplomacy being practised here, a bundle of energy bound in starch-fronted evening dress.

There was one other guest of note. A tall, fair man, dressed in a summer-weight suit, had been introduced to her as Dr Morrison; the *Times*' Peking correspondent. He shook her hand firmly, and she sensed him appraising her, the quick meat-market glance up and down. When he saw that she recognised his look, his eyes glittered with amused acknowledgement. His voice, when he asked her the polite questions of small-talk, had a subtle rising inflection that gave him away as an Australian. Where Christién was restless in the social strictures, Morrison was confident and relaxed, like a resting cat.

The meal was a brilliant forgery of English cuisine, with Chinese ingredients replacing European ones as if it were perfectly normal for rice to pretend to be potatoes. Rich red sauces tinged the air with the polite suggestion of spices.

'Is there any news from Africa, Dr Morrison?' Mrs Grieves was asking the journalist. He had been sat to her right, opposite Octavia.

Every time Octavia glanced up she caught him looking at her, something between curiosity and superiority in his eyes.

'Nothing since the relief of Mafeking, I'm afraid. This war seems set to run for months yet. The Boers simply won't accept that the British have the best interests of Africa at heart.'

'Also the best interests of the British,' Sorokin remarked, smiling lightly.

'The British Empire is a magnanimous one. It *is* true that there were questionable practises in the past; I shipped undercover on a bluebird boat once, transporting indentured labour from Queensland to New Guinea. But for all its faults, it's not like the court here, ruling out sound ideas out of emotive peasant superstition.'

'That peasant superstition is dangerous, sir,' remarked Christién. He was sat next to Octavia, and this was the first time she'd actually heard him speak.

'Surely it is just foolishness?' Miss Munroe asked.

'The cost of knives in the city has doubled since the winter, Miss Munroe,' Morrison answered. 'This superstition feeds the rising tide of anti-foreign feelings. The so-called "secret" societies are becoming more public. Missionaries have been killed in the poorest provinces. The starvation of the peasants is seen not as the fault of the weather or the mismanagement of the court, but as our unwelcome influence. This is more than "foolishness".'

There was a long pause, as Miss Munroe hastily dabbed at her lips and Morrison looked briefly guilty for his brusqueness. His eyes caught Octavia's and he smiled fleetingly.

'How goes your own war, Miss Octavia? Your "War in Heaven"?'

Octavia finished a mouthful of Chancellor's pudding before replying. She wasn't entirely surprised that they knew of the Faction and the War, nor that they'd recognised her as a participant. She suspected that Ursula had let it be known, just to make things more awkward for her, and it wasn't as if anyone seated at this table would have been greatly surprised. The various powers involved in the War had, after all, been involving themselves in the affairs of the world's ruling classes for generations. The "Great Game" between the nations may not have been directly connected to the larger War, but the two were similar enough for those involved in one to acknowledge the truth of the other.

Even so, Octavia doubted that anybody else present would have appreciated the true scale of things. Many of them doubtless thought of Faction Paradox as little more than a secret society itself, like one

of the ruling cliques and clubs of England. To them the term “War in Heaven” would have sounded like sheer hyperbole, or at worst, like an excess of religious enthusiasm. She phrased her reply carefully.

‘As with the south of Africa, Dr Morrison, we are expecting decisive events very soon. Faction Paradox has been responsible for the lifting of a certain… siege. Our people are now routing the enemy from the entire area.’

‘I thought the Faction would be in favour of the Enemy?’ Christién asked.

So, even *he* had an opinion? Octavia noted, too, that he’d used the word “Enemy” as if it were a name in itself; he’d assumed, correctly, that she’d been referring not to the enemies of the Faction but the enemy of the Great Houses’ ruling elite.

She turned to him, smiling for the first time. ‘The notion that “the enemy’s enemy is my friend” is a suspect strategy, Mr. Christién. Does America side with the Boers just because they ceded from Britain, a century ago?’

‘Some do.’

‘Volunteers, yes, but there is no systematic co-operation. The Enemy may regard the Houses and the Faction as standing shoulder-to-shoulder. But even now, the Houses continue their vendetta against our colonies. Faction Paradox is signing up to no side.’

‘But it *is* hoping to gain concessions from the Chinese Imperial Court, perhaps?’ Sorokin remarked. Octavia shrugged, and kept her smile in place.

‘I’m afraid I can’t discuss that, Gospodin Sorokin. After all, I’m sure you would not tell us the details of Russia’s interests here in Peking, would you?’ She moved her glance on to Grieves. He was playing with his dessert spoon, clearly thinking of a polite way to change the subject. Octavia decided to help him out.

‘Christién believes the peasant superstition to be dangerous, Professor Grieves. Has the expedition had dealings with this Boxer sect, then?’

When Grieves looked up at her gratefully, Octavia realised that he had the most intense blue eyes she’d ever seen. At least in a human. He let the spoon rest on the linen.

‘Not only that, but even our workers were a superstitious bunch,’ he said. ‘Let me explain over coffee.’

They moved back into the courtyard after that. A section of walkway had been converted into a veranda, with seating and small

tables. Servants hurried about, repositioning the lanterns so that the area was warmly-lit.

Octavia found herself guided to a seat next to Morrison. He leaned forward as she sat, to whisper: ‘Do Faction ritualists like ghost stories?’

She took a proffered cup of coffee from a servant and sat back, turning her head to whisper back: ‘I like all kinds of stories, Dr Morrison. Even journalism.’

He laughed for the first time, genuine and brief. Then he nodded towards Grieves, and they turned to pay attention. Grieves had taken a seat alone, his wife sitting close by on a chaise.

The Professor took a sip of his drink, waiting for everyone to fall silent before beginning.

Chapter Two

‘We were digging to the southwest of Xi’an, one of the ancient capitals of China. The land there is littered with burial-mounds, to which we were refused access by order of the Dragon Empress. We were allowed to excavate at an old Buddhist monastery, however, since the venerable Dowager cared less for it. In one of the higher caves we found bones carved with an ancient script, older than anything we had previously discovered. Christién set to work decrypting it. It spoke of a goddess, the goddess that hears the cries of the world. In China, they call her Kuan Shih Yin. In India, she is a he: the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

‘We dug deeper, uncovered more bones. The writing described the White Pyramid of China. There have been stories of it, myths of this great structure containing treasures of the pre-Xia age. Some tales describe it as holding the Eight Immortals, others claim that within could be found the path to the Gods’ gardens where the fruit of immortality grows, still others that within it sat the Mother of the World. It took another fourteen months to cross-refer all the extant texts. But I became convinced we had directions to the location of the White Pyramid.

‘We returned to Peking and I wrote to the university. With a little persuasion, they and a private society agreed to finance my continuing expedition.

‘I organised a camel team to take us out to the northwest region. We hired two local guides, twenty bearers. It was last autumn, and the rains were sparse. The entire district was dry. For the first hundred miles the road ran alongside the telegraph, and the bearers were constantly looking upwards, muttering amongst themselves. Zhong, our translator, said it was just superstition. They feared the telegraph because the wires cut through the heavens. Along the route, we stayed at Christian missions, the workmen staying at local inns. The missionaries would tell us of the local lore; of lost temples in the woods, ghost-women and transforming animals.

‘After a fortnight we reached the edges of the Tarim basin, where the Silk Road once arrived from the West. The villages here were sparse and the crops poor, so it was easy to hire labourers. We went south, into land where the roads were just tracks. The trail wound through ancient mountain passes, dark red rock in which we could see the occasional signs of habitation. One evening, Christién climbed up to a cave and found faint inscriptions similar to those on the bones from Xi’an. The next day, we emerged from the pass and saw it.

‘Down in the valley, set square amidst the mountains and still a day’s journey away, was a huge pyramid. It shimmered against the dark landscape, and it seemed impossible that the location had remained a secret for so long. I must have thought it, even as I marvelled that I should have found it at last. There were no villages or buildings, just the giant edifice, yet the track from the pass was clear. Where it entered the valley there were two large, inscribed steles. This was the point at which several of our local workers refused to continue.

‘Zhong cajoled and threatened them. I believe he even said we would leave them there with no food or water, but the men steadfastly refused. We agreed that Christién would set up camp by the steles and work on translating them.

‘We pressed onwards. Now the Pyramid was in sight, I could not rest until we were camped at its foot, so we continued through the night. Before the dawn we reached the structure and struck camp. When we rose, what a sight awaited us!

‘The Pyramid was so great that it seemed to lean outwards over our heads rather than in towards its squared-off tip. It must have been over six-hundred feet in elevation, twice as high as the Cheops pyramid. Yet there was such terrible symmetry to the four sides that it *had* to be manmade; a great cone, like that of Silbury. The soil from which it had been constructed was ashen and coated with tiny, clinging silver plants. My wife began sketching whilst I organised the men into parties, to quarter the ground for indications of where to dig.

‘On the second day, one of the parties began raising a great noise. They were on the north face and a man had fallen. The impact must have disturbed something, for the earth had shifted beneath him.

‘There was pandemonium. The workman wailed that the ghosts of the ancestors were trying to pull him into the grave earth. Others insisted that the surface of the Pyramid itself had trembled. One believed that the land-dragons were awaking and preparing to destroy the foreign devils.

‘The fallen workman demanded that chants were raised to protect him from the spirits. There was no end of bells and gongs and kow-towing. My wife was quite struck with all the mystical shenanigans. Still, we’d never have begun excavations if we hadn’t allowed them it. And what excavations! Where the man had fallen, the soil had shifted to reveal wooden bones. Once-sharp edges, smooth planes, even the carvings of a primitive joist… all indicated man’s hand in this.

‘It bore all the signs of being an access-route to the Pyramid. In the second week, about ten yards from the start of the structure itself, we

began to uncover worked stone. At first I thought it was a single huge block. Then we saw how sharp some lines were, and realised it was a great sealing-stone plugged into what could be a passageway. After careful documentation we agreed to remove the seal in the morning.

'That night, after a meal of rice and vegetables, we retired. I was too entranced by the prospect of what awaited us to sleep easily, and rose to take a night-cap. The wind had changed direction and a chill draught fluttered about my ankles. Just as I began to drift into sleep, I was re-awakened by a great chattering from the workmen. Emerging, I found many prostrate and kow-towing to the stone. Eventually I got some sense out of Zhong. It seemed they'd woken and seen the goddess seated on the stone, toying with a peach. She hadn't said anything, but they claimed that her face had been forlorn, as if her heart had been weeping. Now they were begging her to understand that they had no wish to disturb her. Needless to say, I saw no Bodhisattva sat upon the stone.

'In the morning, the sky was overcast. The first time we had seen any clouds in the dry mountains. After a few photographs of the auspicious day, we began to open the seal. The labourers pulled on the ropes whilst others readied to take the strain of falling rock. A handful of the most trusted men were with us by the seal itself, levering with silk-wrapped crowbars.

'I expected there to be a great groaning. A sigh of released breath, as my wife put it. The stone weighed upwards of five tons. The ropes creaked. The crowbars slipped and rang out like bells against the stone. Then, with less than a whisper from the escaping sand, the great seal fell away.

'The air that escaped was not, as expected, the sour, exhausted air of a tomb. It was cool and fresh, as if the place had only just been sealed, rather than the usual grave stench. Yet when we entered the low passageway, we found that it was indeed a tomb. For curled up hard against the wall were two mummified corpses.

'They were naturally desiccated due to the extremely dry conditions. It was as if they had curled up to sleep and never awoken. We speculated that they may have been tomb-workers, sealed along with the secrets of the mound. Naturally, the word spread rapidly about the camp, causing much excitement.

'Crawling along the passageway, we found another slab of stone barring our way. It had a great symbol carved upon it; the symbol of immortal life. I expected us to be delayed for some time whilst a way past was found. Christién, kneeling in the dust of the millennia, traced the pattern with his finger. Marvelling at the precision of the carving.

We were startled by a faint rumbling, and the slab swung inwards, turning on its axis to fold into the recessed wall.

'We emerged into an empty chamber. It was at least thirty feet wide and ninety long. The walls were rough, unfinished. Perhaps thirty feet above us was a darkly-painted ceiling. When we brought in more lighting, we could see that it was set with polished metal, which flickered in the torches' flare. Otherwise the room was utterly bare. Set in the centre of the right-hand wall was a further opening.

'It was a short passageway, of perhaps ten feet. I expected another seal and was not disappointed. Feeling foolish, I traced the pattern across the great slab and stepped back as it swung silently aside. This time we did not find an empty chamber. Nor did we need our torches, for the inner chamber was already lit.

'Inside were three magnificent thrones, with stone alters before them. In front of these were giant everlasting lamps of terracotta, whose wicks still burnt with a steady flame. They illuminated wall-carvings of primitive dragons and phoenixes, locked in swirling combat. The flickering light made the animals dance. At the sight of this, one of our workmen fled, crying out prayers for protection. Two of the thrones were the same size and made from gilt wood. One had a back-rest carved in the style of a five-clawed dragon, the other a phoenix. The third throne was larger, and was the most northerly. On its jade back was the intricate symbol of eternity.

'There were four entrances to the great hall: the western one through which we had entered; one to the south, which led to an ante-chamber; a further one to the east; and a great beaten copper one to the north. This last, I knew, could only lead to the burial chamber itself. I was anxious to see what lay beyond. For the mummified workmen suggested that the tomb was indeed occupied.

'Instead we crossed the great hall and entered the eastern side-chamber. This was as full as the first had been empty. Where that had nothing but dust, this contained rank upon rank of warriors. Not mummified or painted on the walls, but life-size models in terracotta. They stood facing the doorway. There are stories in most cultures that when a great king or warrior is buried, his court is buried with him in order to serve in the afterlife. In Chinese myth, only the First Emperor took living servants; later rulers took models such as these, which would become animate in Heaven. Yet these warriors wore no identifiable uniforms or symbols.

'Despite her natural anxiousness, my wife began to sketch and photograph everything uncovered so far. Throughout the week we spent detailing the two opened halls, we encountered nothing but

obstruction from our workmen. Many refused to enter the chambers, even after we had carefully removed the two corpses from the entranceway. Of those that Zhong could harass into the Pyramid, half refused to remain there after darkness fell.

'At last we were ready to open the burial chamber itself. The method of opening the seals on each of these chambers was the most curious thing I had ever witnessed. I can only assume that there was a hidden counterweight mechanism. With this final seal, the design was so large that two of us had to trace the pattern. With a low booming note, the great copper panels broke apart and swung outwards.

'The space within was brightly-lit, with everlasting lamps to each compass point. Where the previous chamber had been stone and wood, this was constructed from gold and jade. Oh, some structural elements were stone, but the detail and accoutrements of the grave were all carved jade.

'And grave it was, for on the central dais - raised to chest-height - was a beautiful casket. It was constructed entirely from jade, with golden pins holding each plate in place. When we ventured to lift the lid, we discovered the greatest prize: the body was in place and intact. It had been dressed in rough silk, overlaid with jade tablets sewn together with golden thread.

'We documented everything in situ, then began the process of removing the finest items. To safeguard them, naturally; such finds could not be left to the vagaries of the local authorities. The workmen again required incentives to aid us. Time was running short and we knew we had to leave soon, before the spring rains made our return impassable. We had already packed four warriors and the most important items onto the camel-drawn carts when we came to remove the mummy from its resting-place. As we carefully raised the sling containing the remains, there was a faint grumble of thunder from without the Pyramid. To our labourers, however, this was a dire sign and precious time was lost convincing them to continue.

'As it was lifted over the threshold, the wind from the access tunnel increased and blew out several of the everlasting lanterns. At this, two of the workmen began to chant prayers again. We pushed on. As we carried on through the passageway to the empty chamber, one of the workmen claimed that he had seen movement behind us. Stuff and nonsense brought about by the poor lighting conditions. Nevertheless, the workmen began to hurry us and I must confess that I caught a little of their anxiety. As we emerged, a storm was indeed breaking above us. The wind was scouring passageways in the Pyramid that had not encountered the elements for centuries, perhaps millennia, and those ancient structures were groaning at the foreign touch. We

managed to get the mummy into the covered cart before the rain began.

‘That night we could hear the steady rumble of thunder across the skies and the patter of huge raindrops on canvas. Occasionally, when the wind dropped, we could hear chanting from the workmen. We woke the next day to a remarkable sight: all the sharp sides of the Pyramid had collapsed, a mudslide sealing over the passageway.

‘From that moment onwards, the return to Peking was besieged. I would call it an unfortunate series of events; our workmen called it the vengeance of the spirits. The rain increased as we struggled through the pass. The land had been parched for so long, however, that the water merely turned the dust to mud and ran down every slope as fast as a white-water river. As soon as we were through the pass, having lost belongings to the torrent, the rain evaporated. At Anhsi half a dozen men left in the night. Zhong claimed they were returning home, but we had yet to pay them. There were constant threats of bandits. Even I could occasionally see men watching us from afar. The workmen claimed these were spirit-warriors, coming to rid the land of the foreign devils. At each village more men absconded. Others would be reading ill-printed leaflets, and Zhong assured us it was nonsense about a secret society whom the spirits protected from bullets. We had to abandon one cart after its wheel shattered. The additional load on the remaining carts slowed our progress.

‘We were relieved when we reached the first mission. The couple here had sheltered us on the journey west. Now we found the mission-house abandoned, and the small wooden chapel burnt to the ground.

‘The villagers fell silent as we arrived, all turning their backs on us. Zhong eventually bartered us beds in the inn along with the workmen, but we had to part with more gold than I would have expected. The next morning, we rose to find the wagons had been daubed with Chinese pictograms. Christién easily interpreted them. They were death-threats.

‘At the next mission, the husband was still there. A Frenchman, he had barricaded himself in the mission building and was guarding it with a rifle. He took us in, but could offer us only hard bread and water. None of the townsfolk would trade with him any more. He had sent his wife and son towards Peking when the first Boxer symbols had appeared on his gates.

‘After two weeks, we reached the open road to Peking, and expected to be back here within a few days. As the downpour continued, however, the men took up a great chanting and moaning. They refused to walk on the road, instead taking the remaining carts across

ploughed fields. An axle cracked, and another cart had to be abandoned. I am positive we lost much on that day. I entreated Zhong to convince them to take the beaten track, but he confessed it would be impossible. When I asked why, he pointed upwards. At first I saw nothing, just the leaden sky. Then a gust of wind sent the telegraph wire sawing through the air and I realised. The rain was causing rust-coloured water to fall from the groaning wire in heavy splashes. To the men, who already thought the wire was wounding the sky, the water was as blood.

'That night, huddled in the meagre shelter of another abandoned mission-house, we were attacked. We had chosen a location where we could hope to defend an escape route from the back of the compound. My wife was ready to flee with Christién and Zhong. All the small artefacts remaining in our possession had been wrapped and hidden about their persons. I would stand fast and protect the escape route from the mob. Thankfully, the men we had hired in Peking - before ever setting out westwards - stayed true to us.

'The first sign of the attack was the cascading explosions of fire-crackers. Then the clack of wooden pikes being used to beat against the compound's outer wall. We rushed to the courtyard and waited. Over the crackle of fireworks and the chanting of the crowd, there was a fluttering whistle. Then the rain of fire began.

'Arrows were being fired over the roofs, their heads wrapped in hay and set alight, sparking in the wooden walls and stable straw. We tried to stand our ground as the first rioters pushed through the gate, but almost immediately we had to fall back to the main hall. Yet, curiously, the Boxers were more interested in the carts. We held our fire as they pillaged, smashing any Western artefacts they found and hauling away anything from the tomb. Christién was beside himself at the looting, but I stayed his hand. Better for us to escape alive than to needlessly risk our lives. For all that there must now be hovels in that little town containing treasures of the pre-Xia epoch, we managed to save the most precious items.'

Grieves had reached out to take his wife's hand at one point as he'd recounted the attack, and she was smiling gently. She rose, and all the men sat about on the improvised veranda felt compelled to stand. Octavia realised that she'd been leaning forward as Grieves had narrated the expedition, and she could see how he was privately smiling at his wife's sense of stagecraft.

'Come,' Mrs Grieves invited. 'Come and view the occupant of the White Pyramid.'

Chapter Three

The study lamps had been lit whilst Grieves had been talking. The rooms occupied the eastern side of the compound. As Octavia crossed the square courtyard, her hand politely resting on Morrison's arm, she glanced up at the rooftop. All along the ridge, pottery figures of monkeys and chickens peered down at her. They were the guardians; set there to protect the place. Morrison followed her gaze.

'Ah, of course,' he remarked. 'I suppose you can't enter the building without permission? Like a vampire?'

Octavia smiled tightly, withdrawing her hand. 'Not exactly, sir. But I *have* been invited.'

She could feel it as she stepped over the threshold; the faintest tease of a barrier, reluctantly lowered. Mrs Grieves' invite meant that the whole compound was open to her. She doubted the woman was even aware that the protection provided by the creatures on the roof had any level of reality. She'd probably done a nice *sketch* of them.

The plain outer walls of the side-building had been folded back to reveal an inner wall, running the length of it. This was made up of panels, delicately carved with filigree work. Two of the panels had been opened to reveal a large central room, where tables laden with manuscripts and artefacts filled every foot with Grieves' work. And within the study room was another room, a chamber made of cedar and locked with a heavy iron bar.

Octavia was immediately drawn to the two terracotta statues which bracketed the door of the innermost chamber. Both were about five feet tall, and unpainted. The clay had been moulded into folds of loose material about them, with wide waist-sashes and headbands. It had been sculpted with such dexterity that she could imagine the fabric had been frozen whilst fluttering in a faint breeze. Their faces, likewise, displayed a certain individuality. Her hand brushed lightly over one. Christién saw her interest.

'Fascinating, are they not, Miss Sutherland? These are just two of the four we brought back intact. Each one has something unique to its face or clothing. The craftsmanship is far beyond what one expects of the period.'

Sorokina shuddered, theatrically. 'An entire army of such things. How monstrous!'

Octavia glanced at her. 'You should see the revenant armies of Orphelia, Gospozha Sorokina. At least a billion reanimated creatures,

sadly not made of clay but of amphibian flesh. *Glinyaniye muzhchini nye dolzhni paboyatsya*.'

'You speak Russian, mademoiselle?' Sorokin asked.

'A little light conversation only. Taught to me by an intimate.'

Grieves was carefully returning the keys of the inner room to his trouser pocket whilst they talked, Octavia noted. Once Sorokina had been reassured, Octavia hiding her amusement at so easily alarming the woman, he pushed his fair hair back out of his eyes and fussily nodded to them all.

'Ladies, gentlemen.' He opened the doors wide, folding them out so that the two statues on guard were hidden. Within the cedar box was an altogether smaller room, as yet unlit. Two more figures stood in the shadows, the light from the doorway hiding their terracotta features. No-one did more than glance at them, however, because resting on a long trestle table in the centre of the chamber was the mummy.

It lay on the jade panels that must have formed the base of its coffin, but the sides were gone. Unlike an Egyptian mummy, it was not bound and hidden. Instead they could see the darkened skin clinging tightly to the bones. It still wore the silk fabric grave-clothes, with finely-carved jade laid over the top. Gold-thread details glittered as Christién moved about the inner room, lighting small lanterns and filling the enclosed air with the smell of hot oil. The illumination fell on the mummy's face and hands, glowing faintly across the surfaces of the large jade casket it still held in its grip. There were slight gasps as each person realised what they were seeing.

The mummy - the inhabitant of the White Pyramid of China, a structure so great that it must have been built for a *truly* important body - was a European woman. It was in the shape of the face, the slope of the forehead and in the hair. This was not tightly-pinned to the head, but fanned out as if freshly-brushed. It was red. Unmistakably, unarguably red.

'Fascinating, isn't it?' Grieves commented, as the visitors began to move about the chamber, circling the ancient corpse as if it were a sleeping animal. Morrison, less wary than the others, leaned forward and peered closely at the hair.

'Breakdown of the shaft pigmentation, after burial?'

Grieves shook his head. 'I thought of that at first, but you can compare it to some samples I have in the outer study. The two workmen, who we presume to have died at a similar time, have lost some pigmentation but still have clearly black hair. Besides, there's the skull structure! This find suggests that contact between the East

and West was established at a far earlier point in history than we ever thought. This Western woman was buried with all the accoutrements of an imperial figure.'

Sorokin tapped his cigar and pointed towards the jade casket with it. 'What's in the casket?'

'In Egyptian culture,' Octavia offered, 'the dead are buried with coptic jars containing their organs. Heart, lungs, brain and viscera.' She was gratified to hear Sorokina's nervous little choke beside her.

Grieves looked sceptical, although he'd obviously thought of it himself at some point. 'Since the process of mummification is different in this culture, I doubt that's the case. The truth, however, is that we have yet to open the casket.'

They all leaned in to take a closer look at it. It was perhaps twelve inches broad, eight deep and six high. The jade was old, dark with pale veins of whiteness. The carvings were visible, even beneath the twig-fingers of the mummy. A dragon on one side and a bird of some kind on the other, stylised and sinuous. A knot of a circular seal was carved into the top, all perfect curves and straight edges. There was a heavy line, suggesting the joining of the lid to the casket.

'Really, you transported it all the way here without wanting to open it?'

'I did not say that we have not tried. The opening mechanism and hinges are hidden.' Grieves reached out and, with delicate tenderness, lifted the casket from the mummy's dark hands. The arms of the corpse didn't even move a fraction of an inch, as if it had been expecting someone to loot its property. 'As you can see, it's a simple matter to remove it from its resting-place. But, gentlemen, try to open it. Without force, please.'

Sorokin took it first. He inspected it from each obvious angle, running one fine finger along the straight edges. He held it up against the lamps, although Octavia doubted very much that he'd see anything useful that way.

'Logic would suggest it is like the wooden puzzle-boxes that the street-hawkers sell, would it not?' he asked. Grieves coughed a little at that, so Sorokin smiled briefly. 'I mean that a precise sequence of pressures must be applied which then spring the mechanism and release the hidden catch.'

They all watched as he carefully tapped parts of the carved pattern, pausing to listen occasionally as if expecting a neat click. Octavia glanced upwards briefly, checking that the old red rafters of the room weren't filled with a jeering audience of gods for Sorokin's theatrics.

The space above her looked quite empty, and the architecture looked particularly solid. The ceiling was of oak, seasoned until it was black and harder than stone. As she looked back towards the Russian, she caught Morrison watching her.

'May I?' he asked Sorokin, who made a great show of giving up the casket to the journalist. Morrison jabbed one of the carved creatures in the eye, causing Octavia to wince. He tried turning the casket over in his hands a few times, tapped it with his knuckles and shrugged. 'Damned if I know. I get confused trying to unpack my shaving kit.'

Then he looked at Octavia.

'We may not be able to open it physically,' he said. 'But perhaps our Cousin here could have a little mystical peek?'

Octavia didn't find this request even remotely surprising. You could always rely on the predictability of a dinner-party audience.

At the command of Mrs Grieves, a circular table was positioned in the centre of the main hall. From the way the servants quickly arranged it under the main lantern - with chairs equidistant around it, candles and incense all about - Octavia realised that she'd assessed the woman correctly at their first meeting. Mrs Grieves was a born mark for mystical exploitation. She was fussing over the dark red damask cloth that had been spread over the table when Octavia entered.

'Oh, Miss Sutherland! We're nearly ready, that is, if…'

'Please, Mrs Grieves. I only require a few moments alone to prepare.'

Mrs Grieves flustered about, shooing out the servants and closing the door to the courtyard after her. Octavia quickly swept the damask off the table. The table itself was polished cherry-wood, so smooth it cast wavering reflections. Octavia knew how to create a dramatic séance, using the tricks she'd seen over the years on the mystical circuit in London. Tins strapped to the knees with which to rap on tables, a sliver of blade under the nail so that the slightest touch drew blood. She was familiar with all the theatrics; she'd just never needed them.

Mrs Sutherland's eighth daughter had been a natural. She'd spoken of the past, of the future, and the gullible marks had shuddered in terrified delight. She knew now that it was her witchblood, skipping into their biodata and reordering their lives to suit her visions. She knew now how to control it.

She also knew the stories of how it could come to control her.

Her plan had been to reconnoitre during the party and then remove

the casket, using her witchblood to erase all traces of herself in the lives of the ex-pats. She'd checked every source; this time and place was the only moment when the reports (or, as Ursula might have called them, "myths") about a casket-of-secrets coalesced around an actual artefact. The only moment when it could be snatched out of time. Octavia suspected that someone had been weaving some rather effective obscuring rituals about it, in itself a sign that the object had value to the time-active powers. If that were the case, then this damn séance would give her a chance to cast about for protective wards around the casket in advance.

She walked slowly about the table, checking the positions of the chairs, predicting who'd take which seat. A well-trained fraudulent medium could do this sort of thing through pure banal psychology, but Octavia had to do things the hard way. The wood held hints of its timeline, a sense of the many people who'd use it over the coming years and who'd used it in the past. There was going to be a lot of blood in the future. She chose the least heavy chair, and moved two of the candles to rest on a sideboard behind it, a shoulders' width apart. Then she sat, placing her hands palms-down on the table.

'I'm ready, Mrs Grieves. You may enter.'

Professor Grieves led the way as the servants opened the doors for him. He had the casket again, and held it clasped to his chest with both hands. Morrison followed, clearly amused that his idea had been taken seriously. As he walked around to the chair which Octavia had guessed he'd pick, to her immediate left, he deliberately leant over and peered under the table. Mrs Grieves glanced disapprovingly at him and he flashed a grin at her. Miss Munroe had left in the interval, it seemed, citing some early-morning appointment as an excuse. The Professor took up his position on Octavia's right.

'Please, Professor, if you would be so kind as to place the casket at the centre of the table.'

'You don't need to be touching it?'

'I prefer not to be. The casket will act as the focalisation of the group. Mrs Grieves, would you be so good as to extinguish all but the main light above us and the candles behind me, and then join the circle? And now, if everyone would take up the hand of the person next to them? Please, remove any gloves…'

As Mrs Grieves hurried to comply, Octavia was pleased to see that the overhead light glistened on the jade and reflected more brightly in the polished wood. The guests glanced about before forming the circle. There was a nervous giggle from Sorokina as she took up Morrison's left hand. Octavia closed her eyes.

‘Please. Focus on the casket. Gaze on it.’

She could imagine what the others were doing. With all the right lighting-conditions in place, the casket would float on a miasma of reflected and refracted light. The harder they tried to focus, the less settled it would appear. She could sense the mood of the room, the usual mix of disbelief and fervent hope. The last drifts of dinner-smells were overridden by melting wax and burning cotton-wicks. The table beneath Octavia’s fingertips trembled with the soft inhalations and exhalations of those present. She waited for the vibration to speed up as their heart-rates fell into synchronisation. Waited until she felt them doubt and wonder.

She began the chanting, low and soft so that the syllables were just below comprehension.

‘All things are ready, come to the feast. Come for the table now is spread!’

The words didn’t matter; they were mainly there for the sake of the audience. She’d never needed such rituals to control a séance. Her witchblood, and the limited awareness that her shadow had gained on her initiation, gave her everything she needed. As the words became strung together, a single continuous roll of sound, she set her blood free.

She flung her head back so that the skull felt heavy on her neck. Her arms stiffened. She let her grip on her shadow relax. Now it was free, it started inspecting the objects within its reach. The candles behind her threw it forward towards the casket. It sheathed its sabre and picked the casket up, to gasps from the guests.

The grip of the men’s hands on her own is insubstantial; nothing but smoke on her skin. They are all that anchor her, and the warm jade in her hands draws all her senses. It glows. She can taste Morrison and Sorokin on it, faint wisps of eucalyptus and samovar steam, and beneath that is Grieves and the expedition. All sand and fear. She focuses on going back before that, peeling away the layers of transient touches in favour of something deeper in the lattice memory.

It has been tampered with.

Overwritten again and again. The deep mineral memory is being tweaked and twisted and reworked, even as she tries to pin it down. When she tries to grab onto one tag, tries to leave a marker in a path through its history, it flickers and is rewritten.

It’s as if someone else with active biodata - someone else with witchblood - is tied to the creation of the casket. Maybe it’s even Octavia herself, changed beyond all recognition. She cries out wordlessly, willing her

shadow to release the casket. It is truculent.

'Return,' she vocalises, and it reluctantly slunk back behind her, pooling on the floor.

There were stories. Eleven-Day urban myths of the dangers of witchblood. How some Cousin had accidentally encountered their own ever-mutating, ever-fluctuating, ever-revising biodata stream. How, not recognising itself, the witchblood had started to rework the stream and thus write the ritualist out of history. In the Empire's capital, the myth was recounted as a playful ghost story. In the field, witnessing two trails of witchblood tangling into each other and fighting for dominance, it seemed far too plausible and far too *close*.

Morrison's thumb lightly touched on the pressure-point between two tendons. Octavia opened her eyes, lowered her head and realised that the others were all staring. Waiting for the usual rigmarole. There was information now, grabbed by her senses during the trance and unconsciously translated into meaning.

'It's old,' she told them, only very slightly playing things up for dramatic purposes. 'Older than it ought to be. Older than time. Yet only a few thousand years old. It belongs to an Immortal, one who has gained the secret of extending experience into the forever and who is no longer bound to the flesh. A spirit. It contains… life.'

'Probably some ancient bacterial curse,' Morrison remarked, and the thick cloying spell was broken. Octavia looked at the other dinner guests as they laughed.

All but two were going to die in the coming war.

At each hour, a sonorous chime rang out from the Bell Tower within the Imperial City. At its single note, the music of Peking would shift. In the sixth hour of the day, the watchmen - who'd been slowly pacing the night, rhythmically chanting to beware of fire - were being overtaken by the swish-swash of the street-sweepers' brooms. As Octavia walked along the side-street, the tea-shops were just sluicing their floors and stoking up the fires ready for the morning. She knew she stood out as much for her lack of apparent purpose as for her skin and clothing.

She had lain on her bed as the night had passed, committing the evening's events to memory. The dinner, Grieves' story, the séance. She liked to reiterate everything, tag it and file it. Partially in case it became relevant but mostly for fear of forgetting, in spite of the memory augmentations. She had almost forgotten Anastasia for a while, their friendship fading into sepia.

The walk back to her accommodation had been swift. Morrison had a long stride, which he'd slowed only slightly as he'd escorted her home after midnight. The Grieves had looked faintly scandalised at the idea of Octavia *walking* back to her rooms, and she couldn't work out if they'd become more or less concerned when Morrison had suggested that he should go with her. Eventually they'd salved their consciences by insisting that a houseboy chaperone them, lighting the way with a lantern.

'So how do you find Peking, Miss Sutherland?' Morrison had asked as they'd walked.

'I turn left at Tientsin.' As expected, he'd looked confused. She'd smiled briefly.

'Was that Faction humour, Miss Sutherland? By the by, what is the correct term of address for one of you? Cousin? Miss Octavia?'

'My full title is rather long, Dr Morrison. Why don't we keep to "Octavia"?'

They'd walked on, following the bobbing light of the lantern. Octavia had gestured to Morrison's other arm. 'I see you've acquired a book. May I enquire…?'

'You may. Grieves' expedition journal. Our Professor has notions of publication, and wishes to know if the *Times* would be interested.'

'And will it?'

'I have no idea. My reports tend to involve rather more politics and rather less adventuring.'

'Really? I heard you've had quite a few escapades in the past.'

'Done your research, hmm? I was a little younger then. And not on a salary.'

He'd seen her into the gate of the Legation compound, taken his leave with a brusque kiss on the back of her hand, and headed off to - she knew - a house somewhere in the Chinese districts. She'd risen again on hearing the first stirrings of servants. It had been easy to slip out of the compound, nodding with a smile to the guard. He may have wondered at her movements, but then, she'd be gone in another hour and he'd forget that he'd ever seen her.

She retraced the route to the Grieves household, expecting the district to be quiet. It was a residential street, away from the morning markets. As she hopped neatly over a rivulet and turned into the Grieves' road, she found instead that there was a small crowd gathering by the gates. They were chattering amongst themselves and peering into the courtyard. A row of nervous servants was standing across the opening, apparently telling the crowd to go away. Her

mood sinking with the realisation that she wasn't going to manage a quiet entrance and getaway, Octavia jostled her way through, ignoring the demanding questions she couldn't understand. In the courtyard, beyond the line of men, Mrs Grieves was pacing back and forth. Glancing between the study and the gate.

'Miss Sutherland! Oh, my dear! I wasn't expecting you. Please, let her through!'

Unwillingly, Octavia took the hand Mrs Grieves offered her. The other was convulsively opening and closing about a damp handkerchief, she noticed. They drew away from the gates.

'Those gawpers, really, I can't bear it.'

'Mrs Grieves? What's happened?'

'You don't know? I wondered, when I saw you there, that perhaps Dr Mor… no, I'm being foolish. I've sent for him. Christién went for him as soon as we realised.'

'Realised what, Mrs Grieves? Has something happened to the artefacts?'

'I've no idea!'

Octavia led the woman towards the veranda, trying calm her. As soon as they were seated, Mrs Grieves was on her feet again, taking a few steps towards the gate. Christién had returned with a crumpled Morrison in tow, the latter carrying a small doctor's bag. Half a dozen other Europeans followed, looking half-sleepy as if dragged from their breakfasts.

'What's all this about Grieves locking himself in his study?' Morrison demanded.

Mrs Grieves shook her head. 'That's quite normal. But I heard a shot!'

'Two,' Christién corrected. 'There were two shots. Le Professor has the only keys to that room, and the wood is like iron.'

'We'll see about that.'

Morrison organised some of the men to improvise a battering ram. Octavia watched as the wood shuddered, but held. There was something familiar here. An iron tang in her nose. Despite Mrs Grieves holding her hand so tightly that her bones winced, Octavia stepped towards the study just as the lock gave way.

There was blood. Fresh, but no longer living. Inside the inner study, the trestle had been pushed against a wall, the warriors smashed. Grieves lay on his side, a service revolver in one hand. His other rested on his stomach, where his entrails spilled across the wooden

floor. Watery yellow fluids mingled with the blood, the released contents of bowels and stomach where the flesh had been ripped open, still slowly spreading. Octavia caught a glint of blood-coated metal before Mrs Grieves started screaming. As she turned the woman away from the study, Octavia made sure they faced towards the excitement at the gate.

The crowd was parting as three sedans arrived, flanked by men in uniforms. It looked worryingly like officials.

Chapter Four

As the servants scurried aside, the phalanx escorted the sedans chairs through the gateway. The two foremost were arrayed in the fine coloured silks of high-ranking mandarins. The third was plainer, of simple black and barely more impressive than the ones for hire on the streets. The passenger in the first carriage was stepping out even before the runners set it upon the ground. Brown leather armour overlaid the russet silks of his uniform, announcing his military bearing as loudly as the cry of one of his entourage who was calling out something in Chinese. The second carriage was carried up so that it was parallel with the first, clearly at the command of the passenger. He emerged once it was set on the ground. He was older, with a steely queue emerging from beneath his lapis-lazuli-tipped hat. His dark silken robes were laden with embroidered indications, obscure symbols sewn on like a row of medal ribbons on an English colonel, and a stylised blue-and-green bird rising up on the central chest panel. He bowed neatly to the group by the study doors, leaning forward easily at the waist. Whilst the first man scowled impatiently, the older looked content to wait until the final person arrived.

To Octavia's surprise the last, plain, carriage contained a girl. She was dressed in a simple cream silk trouser-suit, with wide cuffs embroidered in reds and blues. Her hair was pinned into a plain ivory comb. She almost ran over to the group, bowing deeply.

'Sirs, Madams. I have the honour to greet you in the name of His Excellency Xu Dian Ning, official of the third rank, and His Excellency Meng Rong Kuan, Commander of the Green Bannermen, her Immortal Empress' most trusted advisors. We trust that you will forgive this unannounced visit but matters of great urgency exercise our beloved ruler. We would speak to the scholar Grieves.'

By this point someone had, at least, managed to detach Mrs Grieves from Octavia's arm and quieten the woman in the presence of the officials. But mention of her late husband caused her to give out a startled cry, as if choking back an urge to vomit. Christién was the first to respond to the visitors, furiously scowling as he stepped forward. Behind him, the men from the Legation were casually shifting to form a barrier to the study. Octavia doubted they were even conscious of their immediate protective instincts. Christién addressed the two Chinese men.

'This is just impossible! It's just not -'

'I'm afraid Professor Grieves is unavailable,' Morrison interrupted,

speaking to the translator. He'd straightened to his full six-foot height, and his Australian accent had noticeably Anglicised. The British Empire's stiff upper lip in all its glory, Octavia thought. She was trying to shift backwards a little, hoping that the confrontation in the courtyard would afford an opportunity for her to slip into the study and take the casket. It was a form of grave-robbing, of course, but it was barely any different to what Grieves himself had done inside the Pyramid; the only difference was the age of the corpse.

The age, and its condition. The Legation types were still blocking the entrance, but what they couldn't do was block the smell. Commander Meng noticed it first, judging by the way he wrinkled his nose and then his brow. As the girl translated Morrison's continuing excuses, he said something quickly to Xu. The official's eyes glanced towards the blocked doorway and he hastily asked the translator a question. She nodded.

'Xu would ask from whom he is receiving these apologies?'

'Dr George Morrison. I am here in my capacity as a family friend.'

There was a long pause, as if the concept took longer to explain in translation. There was a rapid consultation. The translator looked uncomfortable as she turned back to Morrison.

'The wise official Xu and determined Commander Meng are most concerned that there may have been violence done to Professor Grieves. This house falls under the jurisdiction of our authorities, since it is outside the Legation walls, and they feel they would be remise if they did not investigate.'

It was fairly obvious that they were not going to go away, and Octavia was not surprised when Morrison stepped aside and invited them to view the body.

Lanterns were brought to cast their amber light over the innards of the chamber. Only Morrison, Christién and the Chinese officials entered the room itself. Morrison had sent most of the men from the Legation away, asking one to send the British minister over if possible, so Octavia and the translator had a clear view through the doorway.

Grieves' body had collapsed into itself. The uncleaned blade of the sword was dark with drying blood, though Octavia's professional eye doubted it had been that sharp before. It was just a blade, nothing special. Meng crouched over the body, inspecting it. He glared at the translator, then spoke.

'Commander Meng thinks that the cause of death is apparent.'

Morrison was dry. 'I think it's quite evident. When the room was

broken open, the body was still settling. The question is, who did this?'

'Thieves?' suggested Meng, and for a scant moment Octavia thought he was making an accusation; it seemed likely, after all, that the officials were here to ask for their artefacts back. Christién was looking about the room, his lips silently mouthing an inventory.

'I do not think anything has been taken,' he commented, 'and besides, the doors were locked on the inside. Grieves was concerned that no more objects should be lost to antiquity.'

Octavia frowned to herself, quickly flicking through the notes she'd made the previous night. The mummy and its casket now looked forlorn, pushed to one side by the bloody chaos. It was more like a bundle of dry sticks and discoloured rags in the stronger light, and less real for that.

'One of the statues is missing,' she said.

Morrison crouched next to the body, his knees next to Meng's, and reached forward. Octavia expected him to close the corpse's eyes, but instead he reached into the debris of the body and retrieved a curved shard of terracotta. It gleamed like a daguerreotype, blood blackening and acids shining as they dried. He held it carefully, by just one jagged point, turning it about to look at the shape of it. Then he stood and moved towards the door, wrapping the shard in a handkerchief and handing it to Octavia.

'The statue isn't missing. It's been shattered. During a fight with an intruder, I think.'

'Yet you tell us the door was locked when you arrived,' Meng pointed out, after a hurried bout of translation. 'Is there another entrance to the room?'

'None,' Christién said. 'This room is totally secure.'

Octavia doubted that. From her inspection last night she'd seen a couple of potential entry-points, but any intruder would have left signs. Damage to the structure that would have indicated their entrance / exit.

Unless it had been another time-active power? Then they could have done some sneaky business reconstructing the traceries of the ventilation panels. Or reworked things so that they were standing right there in the room, but in some slightly different timestream. That was the nuisance of time-active warfare; a battleground could span a few square feet, but be unimaginably complex in all its dimensions. Normally those spots ached, though, like a mis-set broken bone on a cold day. There was none of that here. She could still see

the casket, toppled to rest on its side on the mummy's chest. Pity she daren't just walk in and take it.

Her research had suggested that Grieves had died in the Boxer uprising. This death, by no Boxer hand and with the potential intervention of a War-time power, made her cautious about stepping into the room. If it were about to become a Warzone, then she needed to be better-prepared. She wasn't frontline-ready any more. Not, in fact, since she'd led the Valentine's Day attack on the Thirteen-Day Republic.

The men were coming out of the chamber, so Octavia and the translator stepped back. There was something odd about the girl, Octavia thought. Not her reaction to the corpse; Chinese justice favoured public executions, so it was unlikely to be the first dead body the girl had seen. Nor was it the speedy and neat translations she was providing, the slight lilt in her voice as she tested words for suitability. With the shard tingling in her hand, Octavia couldn't quite focus on her.

Christién fussed with the inner doors, trying to reclasp the torqued lock. The air was becoming heavier now, thick with the buzz of dead flesh and curious flies. The visitors waited until he turned to face them.

'I think we may conclude that, aware of the dishonour he was bringing upon his family by his acts, the scholar Grieves chose to end his own shameful life,' Xu stated through the translator.

'That's ridiculous!' Christién snapped.

'Surely,' Morrison asked of Xu, 'you should consider other possibilities, if you are to investigate his death?'

'There is little to investigate. The honourable Commander Meng is correct in his judgement.'

'There are gangs attempting to rouse anti-foreign feeling in the streets of Peking. Grieves spoke only yesterday of being hounded by such a mob. It is the duty of the court to protect the foreigners within the country, is it not?'

'My duty to the court is to request the return of the artefacts. We are aware of the strong feelings of the Righteous Harmonious Fists. With regret, your concerns for the safety of your people should be addressed through the General Management Office.'

'A man has been murdered!' Morrison started to raise his voice now, and Christién had moved back in front of the doors to the study.

'A man has died,' Xu told them.

'With his death, his claim to the artefacts is forfeit,' Meng insisted.

‘We will await the return of them to the Tsungli Yamen immediately.’

After the translator passed this on, she turned to Commander Meng and spoke to him. He scowled and spoke to Xu, who in turn reprimanded the girl. She bowed her head briefly, then looked up and spoke again. Meng took a step towards her, before pausing to glance at the watching Europeans. He said something curt, still addressed more to Xu than to the girl. Xu talked at length and, despite her lack of any Chinese languages, Octavia suspected a scolding was taking place. Then Meng nodded briefly to Morrison and Christién, bowed from the waist towards the figure of Mrs Grieves, and went back to his carriage. Xu also bowed, this time towards everyone, and spoke.

‘His Excellency Xu Dian Ning,’ translated the girl, ‘deeply regrets the misfortune which has befallen this household and hopes that the uneasy spirit of the scholar Grieves will be released from this world with the restoration of the ancestral belongings to the great imperial court.’

Octavia waited as the chairs were carried away. Christién was calling the officials all the names suitable for mixed company, but Morrison was hastily writing in a notebook. Octavia assumed he’d be raising the issue with Sir Claude, the British minister in Peking, as soon as the chance arose. She’d read Morrison’s diaries, naturally, as part of her preparation. Anyone who ended up buried as “Morrison of Peking” in some staid little seaside town in Devon had a curiosity factor. There was only a passing mention of Grieves, but she’d assumed that this was in part due to her own influence. Now she suspected it was an imperfect cover-up by someone else.

Octavia joined Mrs Grieves on the veranda. The woman had grown steadily more pallid, her composure evaporating as the sun rose. Octavia took the woman’s proffered hand in her own and made the appropriate sorts of comments. It was stupid, she knew. What could she say, as a supposed medium and go-between with the spirit world? Grieves had dealt with death as a physical reality. He’d seen lifeless tombs and taken the intended comforts away from the insensate dead. How could Octavia mouth litanies about “better places”?

Mrs Grieves nodded at Octavia’s clumsy attempt, then looked earnestly up at her.

‘Tell me. Can you contact him? Discover how this happened?’

Octavia stood awkwardly, ignoring the chair behind her. ‘I’m sorry. It’s not within my skills.’

Mrs Grieves cast aside Octavia’s hand, her fingers drawing back with scorn.

‘Then what use is all your profession?’

Octavia shrugged. ‘I am not a spiritualist of your time, Mrs Grieves. I’m no table-rapper. You should save your concern for your own situation, not that of the hereafter.’

She turned away to walk across the open courtyard. Christién had gone back to the study lock, calling for the servants to bring tools. Morrison was talking to a newly-arrived man in a western suit. She ignored them all, stepping straight through the loose line of Grieves’ servants and back into the street.

Something had changed with the rising heat of the day. The calm morning had been smothered by humid dust. Flimsy yellow papers clung to the walls of Grieves’ compound, slimy with fresh paste. The crowd of the morning had evaporated.

Octavia walked through the streets, looking for a suitably quiet spot to inspect the fragment of stained terracotta in her reticule. Earlier she’d felt that her lack of known purpose marked her, but now curious gazes avoided her. Hawkers slipped from her path, tea-shop owners’ eyes were as glazed as their bowls. Sound was just as reluctant to serve her, damped down by the slow air. She needed to find a place of security. The blood was her remote viewing key; a means of reconnoitring the room again without walking into a Warzone by accident. She rested one hand on the bag, felt the faint buzz within and let it guide her. She walked down a side-street, stepping over refuse in the gutters and hearing the chants of militants in the main avenue. They were calling for all foreigners to be repelled.

The call of the blood led her eastward, into a maze of temples to Bodhisattvas in calm repose and Daoist demons in frenetic dances. There was a small courtyard, closed off by buildings all about, without even a tree. It could have been a street-shrine in Sao Paulo, in New York, in Jakarta. The heat froze the air, slowed it to a standstill. Stood within the yard, looking at the unadorned walls, she could hear the faint brass tangle of bells from the temples and smell the sour incense. There was a deep rhythm to the distant chants of the Boxers vibrating through the city, countered by the whispers from a nearby Christian church.

She let her legs fold beneath her, falling easily to sit cross-legged in the ancient, unwanted dirt of this unclaimed corner. She drew the shard from her reticule. The fluids had almost dried now, sinking into the porous clay. She traced the interlaced edges of the patterns they made, the thick line of sticky black blood that had run across the details.

‘All things are ready, come to the feast. Come for the table now is

spread.'

She tastes the sand of the valley first, the dead ashen dust of the tomb. Obviously, since this is Grieves' dying blood and its thoughts are graven. Then there are bolts of brightness, the rich red of desire and the anxious yellows of fear. She lets her witchblood play and tease at Grieves' biodata, then nudges it towards the room and the casket. She feels the cool of the stone flagstones of the courtyard beneath her slippered feet as Grieves crosses it again, on his unwitting way to his disembowelling. The study springs up around her, warm lamplight softening the lines of it. She's sorting through a collection of small pots. Something makes her glance up, some impossible movement on the edge of her sight.

'Who's there?' Grieves asks. Her hand drops to the pistol resting on the desk, the thumb straining to pull back the strong trigger. A chittering makes her look up. Above her, hanging from the eaves, animals snap and growl and fly at her, claws extended. They drive at her, talons towards her eyes so that she flings up her arm to ward them away.

No. This is not how it happened, this is not how it's happening. The creatures are coming at her*, not at Grieves. Pushing her away from this place.*

She was back in the unclaimed space, her defensively-raised arm blocking nothing.

The way to the study was blocked. Her invitation had been rescinded, and the guardians were aware of her now.

Chapter Five

Octavia watched from the doorway of a tiny Italian shop in the Legation Quarter as a large group of Chinese peasants trailed through the street, the red of the Boxer sash bold on their torsos or used as headbands. Their chant drowned out the normal cacophony of street sounds so that the hawkers and beggars, the knife-sharpeners and butchers, could scarce be heard at all. The tension had been building all through these early days of June. It could only be days or even hours before it found violent release. Young boys dodged along the sides of the street, throwing scraps of paper at passers-by and the stores. One paused to stare at Octavia. He pulled a dull-bladed knife from his waistband and mimed slitting his throat, laughing, his eyes on her own neck. He seemed a little disappointed by her lack of reaction and ran off.

'Oh, how beastly!' Miss Munroe exclaimed from within the store. She stepped out, clutching paper bags filled with dry goods. Octavia offered to carry one.

'I would be grateful, Miss Sutherland, if you are done?'

'I am, yes. The telegram office was a bit of a crush, but I got a message out.'

The group of protestors having moved on, the two women stepped out into the street. They walked swiftly, Miss Munroe striding in her rational dress and Octavia skipping every fourth step to keep up.

'Was that handsome American there?' Miss Munroe asked. Several days and nights had made Octavia her confidante, whether Octavia wished it or not.

'In front of me. He was sending a fairly strong telegram. I didn't expect the Chinese clerks to send it when he used "double-faced", but they just insisted on charging him for two words, not one. Everyone seems to be sending for reinforcements.'

'That was your business there?'

'Yes.' Octavia didn't feel inclined to expand on it. After the guardians had barred her way to Grieves' study, Octavia had known the area was becoming a Warzone. She could probably do well enough on her own, especially up against the more academically-inclined agents of the Great Houses, but she was battle-rusty and there was still the possibility that less predictable time-active powers might get involved. After her days of glory, after the victory parade for Valentine's Day, she'd stopped training in conventional warfare in

favour of her research. Her shadow's blood-lust was gone, it had been said, although there *had* been that duel on Red Lion Square. The loser had been thrown back into linear time and, eventually, died of his wounds. The echo of his panicked, losing footwork could still be heard in the Square one night out of every eleven.

So now she wanted back-up. She wanted her Red Burial.

There had been over four-hundred of them, back in the white nights of the Thirteen-Day Republic. When Cousin-Thrice-Removed Anastasia had led her own revolution against the Eleven-Day Empire. Octavia, busy with her studies, had been surprised to look up from her books and find that her closest friend had gone without a backwards glance. She had stood before the Mace in the House of Commons, at the political heart of the Empire, and offered to bring the rebellion down. Prester John had backed her, talked the other Mothers and Fathers into giving her raw recruits. Four-hundred-and-fifty uninitiated Little Brothers or Sisters for her to experiment with, stripping away and reworking their biodata until they'd begun to mimic Anastasia's own guards.

The Red Burial, as they became known, had won the battle on Valentine's Day. Afterwards, initiated and raised to Cousin status, they'd become the specialist troops used by other military cliques within Faction Paradox. Their biodata would be constantly respliced to suit the conditions of each individual battle. Their loyalty would not be bought, but pragmatically revised. Gradually, the cadre's numbers had fallen until there were just over one-hundred left. Octavia had insisted that they'd always be available to her. Prester John had assured her that, of the remaining troops, forty would be on call for her now.

The telegraph office had been charging by the word, so she'd kept it simple:

BURIAL NEEDED STOP

Octavia and Miss Munroe planned to cross the open ground of the Imperial Carriage Park, a wide, flat, gravelled area designed for practice with horse carriages. With no shade in the centre, the Chinese usually ignored the square. You fgcouldn't play go or chess with the sun beating you more mercilessly than your opponent. In the mid-afternoon, Western couples normally strolled amidst the plane-tree avenues that skirted its edges whilst a few horses were cantered across the gravel. Today the square echoed to the squabble of excited crowds. They stood in large groups, or sat cross-legged on the ground, around handfuls of men and boys in red sashes. Miss Munroe took Octavia's arm and led her to one side, clearly hoping to avoid notice

by taking the longer route through the walkways.

Each Boxer group was yelling and shouting, their arms and legs nothing but blurs of movement. To Octavia's ears and eyes it was unintelligible, just noises and gestures, but to her skin… it prickled and itched. Her shadow pulled at her muscles, making her veer away from these Chinese ritualists.

'They believe in all their mystical mumbo-jumbo,' Miss Munroe remarked, quietly, while helping the shadow to pull Octavia along. 'That they're calling down the spirit-warriors who will possess and protect them against bullets and knifes.'

Octavia had guessed as much. Her blood had sensed it, just as it had felt the guardians repelling her. These rituals had real power. She wanted to stop and look, but Miss Munroe had hold of her arm.

'We mustn't risk being noticed,' the woman said, though she slowed her pace so that Octavia could watch as they walked.

In the centre of the nearest cluster, a Boxer was chanting loudly and throwing a blade up into the air. It twirled and spun, then fell to be caught by the hilt again. Another Boxer, a few feet away, was talking loudly to the crowd; presumably explaining the ritual. The performing Boxer finished his dance and dropped his sword into the dust. The talker raised one arm, and Octavia realised he was holding an old revolver.

Munroe's hand gave her arm a tight squeeze. The Boxer pointed the gun at his comrade and fired directly at the man's heart. The retort echoed about the square. The yellowy-white cloud of smoke drifted in slow coils, smelling faintly of cordite.

When it cleared, the shot man was still standing. He picked up his sword and swirled it about his head, in an intricate pattern. The watching crowd started talking excitedly amongst itself as the Boxer began exhorting them.

'Blanks,' Miss Munroe sniffed. 'They're using blank cartridges to fool the crowd.'

Octavia didn't correct her.

Sir Claude hailed them as they arrived back at the Legation. He was simultaneously conferring with the captain on gate duty and reading sheaves of papers. 'No, damn it man, stop everyone! I want no-one going out without permission. Those bloody fools will only have antagonised the locals. Do what you can to double the perimeter guard, but do *not* fire at anybody!'

And then, without missing a beat: 'Ah, Miss Munroe, Miss Sutherland. Heard about the racecourse? No? It's on fire, set by

Boxers, apparently. Some of the boys rode out to take a look and one damn fool - pardon my language, Miss Munroe - shot a rioter.'

'Surely we should do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves and our property?' asked Miss Munroe. 'Besides, it shows the fallacy of their belief in the "spirits".'

'We saw a Boxer ritual on our way back,' Octavia remarked. Sir Claude paused in his skimming of the papers.

'Really? And what did our Faction Cousin make of it? Professionally?'

'I think they believe themselves to be calling on protective forces. Belief is one of the most powerful ingredients in any ritual.'

'It's superstitious nonsense,' Miss Munroe commented. Octavia turned to her.

'Oh, there's real danger here without any "spiritual" interference. Swords and knives will definitely wound or kill. But would the Boxers dare to act, if they didn't believe themselves to be supported by higher beings?'

'And by the government,' Sir Claude added. 'The court issues new edicts every day, almost every hour. Some don't condone the Boxers, some do. Tze-hsi can't seem to make up her mind, and some of her advisors would happily support this cult if it meant ridding China of foreigners. Still, we're all quite snug here, eh? Oh, if you'll excuse me…'

The captain had hurried back over from the gatehouse, guarding his expression from the women. Back at the postern, an out-of-breath Royal Marine was recovering. The captain leaned over to murmur in Sir Claude's ear.

'Damn it! Apologies, ladies. Miss Sutherland, did you manage to send your telegram this morning?'

'Yes, down to Canton.'

'Seems like it was the last out. The insurrectionists have cut the lines, all except the one to Siberia. The good news is that one of the last telegrams in was from Commander Seymour down in Tientsin. He'll be on the morning train with military reinforcements.'

Octavia was not a morning person. She'd never got the hang of going to bed at what others called a reasonable hour. She *liked* unreasonable hours. Living within the Eleven-Day Empire had let her keep her own time; everyone there followed their own diurnal rituals. Only the annual Feast of Fools acknowledged the concept of daybreak.

Annoyingly, Miss Munroe and her post-dinner port had lulled Octavia into sleepiness, and she'd fallen into the conformity of time. She'd been woken at seven in the morning by a servant with a pot of tea and a rack of cold, soggy toast. At eight, they had set out for the railway station to greet the reinforcements. Octavia was sure it was quite a spectacle, all these European dignitaries arrayed in summer finery traipsing down to wait for the steam-driven cavalry. She was still too muggy-headed to care.

There was the German delegation, led by Baron von Ketteler; the Austrians; the Italians; the Russians, with Sorokin amongst them; a handful of the Dutch, looking quietly serious; the French and the Spanish, engaged in a long conversation; the Americans, talking with comfortable loudness; the Japanese, neat in morning-suits; and the British, sun-shaded and ready for tennis. There were no trains.

The boys who normally vied for the chance to carry luggage had vanished, and the Chinese station-staff could not be found. The whole of the wooden building fluttered with strips of yellow paper, the now-familiar Boxer characters foretelling doom on the disruptive metal line. The tracks already wavered in the rising heat, pinging and steaming as the steel warmed. There was a rising pillar of cloud to the south, and at first they'd taken it as a good sign. Until it had grown higher and darker, but no closer, and they'd realised it was smoke from burning buildings.

Octavia drifted back from the crowd, towards the edges where the servants and coolies stood in studied boredom. Some crouched, playing dice or cards, while others slouched against the walls of the station. They all watched her as she walked across the tracks, into the dry dusty scrub, for perhaps thirty yards. Then she turned back to look.

Between the main platform and herself stood another platform, made of wood and stone. The Faction Paradox train idled there, the great black engine slowly dribbling steam and three gleaming Pullman-style carriages hooked up behind it. This was a ghost platform, the site where the railwaymen had wanted to build the station until a small and significant change had been made, to least disrupt the chi of the city. The world was littered with such places; forgotten termini or sealed underground stations, glimpsed as the mundane train raced past. The Necropolis Line in London, City Hall Station in Manhattan. Octavia's favourite was the British Museum underground station beneath Russell Square, where priceless collections had been sheltered during the Blitz. Back in the Eleven-Day Empire, the Stacks had been constructed to follow these lost geographies, and she'd requisitioned an office in the British Museum

Station replica.

The central lounge car of the steam train was Ursula's own powerbase, the pulsating heart of her operations. Octavia grabbed a brass handrail and pulled herself up the cast-iron steps to enter it. Red velvet and smoky mirrors suggested a traditional drawing-room, the heavy curtains drawn to hide the windows. The air was sharp with copper and electricity. Fans spun, slow sweeps of their blades redistributing the humid air. The walls were lined with gleaming brass and walnut, inlaid with bioplasmic screens displaying the progress of Ursula's various projects. Ursula was never happy unless she was running at least fifteen linear-time-schemes simultaneously. It was a Homeworlder trait. Whereas a human recruit might, with experience, come to manage at most two, three or even five offensives without losing control of any of them (or themselves). Not that it annoyed Octavia.

Not overly.

The nearest end had a navigation area, and all the paraphernalia that went with it. At the other end - where, had it been a real lounge car, there would have been a circle of somnolent leather chairs with cigar-smoke fogging the air - was a large, irregularly-shaped table. Bone yellow, with pockmarks and knife-scores across its surface, and the cracks stained brown. One edge was crumbled, bubbled or boiled so that it seemed porous. Ursula was seated behind it, at the only chair drawn up to it. By her lacy white elbow was a large crystal decanter, filled with a deep red liquid. As Octavia approached, Ursula was pouring the blood across the mammoth's shoulder-bone. It ran in slow rivulets through the scored channels, pooled in the craters to create lakes. Ursula leaned over, watching the run of the liquid with narrowed eyes. When her gaze was raised, Octavia saw for a moment the glint of the hard heart of the Homeworld.

'Oh, it's you. I brought you your reinforcements.'

'There's only twenty of them.'

'So?'

'I was assured that forty would be reserved for me.'

Ursula shrugged. 'Have you seen the latest despatches from Mohandassa? The enemy's got it locked down so tight that you can't get an anachronistic fly into the Warzone. The Homeworld's waiting for see who kills whom in order to slap down the survivors. We don't have time for you to be precious about your old gang. You've got twenty, learn to cope.'

They stared at each other for a long time. Octavia was loathe to give

way, sure that Ursula had made the case with Prester John for the reduced reinforcements, but she had to be pragmatic. Besides, if Ursula wanted to see her aggravated, best to disappoint. She shrugged - perhaps a little too hard - and reached into her reticule, then threw a silk roll down onto the bone scrying-table, carefully avoiding the congealing blood-patterns. Ursula reached across, her eyes still holding Octavia's, and unrolled it. Within were forty fine needles, thin like gossamer, quivering to the triple-pulse of Ursula's heartbeats.

'Blood of two-score non-combatants,' Octavia pointed out. 'Some servants of the Grieves, others Western soldiers. Get half of this lot programmed into my allotted Burial, by tonight if you can bring yourself to leave your fortune-cookie magic for a few hours. Did you manage to scan the suspected hotspot?'

'Of course.' Ursula rose, and walked to a screen, gesturing at it with one uninterested hand. 'No teleportation, no trans-temporal migration, no extra-dimensional glitches. No-one breathes out of synch in that area.'

She waited, then gestured at the display so that it brought up a different string of datastreams. 'Now look at the whole period. Something or someone is perverting the safe routes in. Never mind the poor "non-combatants" out there, waiting for the train that's never going to come. Pretty soon no time-active powers are going to be able to gain access safely. It's being locked down, Cousin, locked up like Mohandassa except that there are three-thousand War-time agents caught up there and what have you got? A score? Not yet ready?'

'Then get them ready,' Octavia told her. 'You're the fixer.'

Octavia stepped back onto the mundane platform, to find that no-one was waiting for the terminally-delayed train any more. The air was stale with the day, heavy with exhaled hopes. They'd all drifted back into the Legation Quarter, trailing their quiet desperation. Octavia started back up the dust road on foot, since all the carriages and sedans were gone. The walls of the city seemed darker and heavier. She passed Kansu braves on the road, wearing their uniform of red and yellow. Not as high in status as the bannermen, not in the world of Commander Meng, but the most visible government troops in the city.

She was almost at the great gate, the sinking sun completely obliterated by the rising stones, when the gathering of the troops became noticeable. Her whole field of vision was red and yellow. In the centre of the swarm was a sedan, black and silver, being rocked and knocked by the men. The bearers, four Chinese in neat black cotton, were bleeding bundles beneath the soldiers' feet.

Octavia dropped down into the ditch beside the road, hoping the raised banks would sufficiently hide her as she tried to make her way around to one of the other gates of the city. Ahead, she saw the contents of the sedan thrown at last into the street. She recognised the neat precision of the morning-dress before she recognised the man: the Japanese Chancellor was joked about for his fussy formality. A great cry went up from the militiamen at the alien thrown into their midst, and they began chanting in earnest.

'Sha! Sha! Sha!'

Octavia ducked down, holding herself still, then carefully raised her head so she could see what was happening. An officer of the men was directing them, and several took hold of Sugiyama's limbs, forcing him to his knees with his arms twisted behind his back. She could hear his stilted Chinese pleading, and see the splash of red sun on the blade of the sabre in the officer's hands. The chanting became louder and faster as the weapon paused, then fell. Sugiyama's head dropped into the dirt, severed arteries pumping blood into a stain on the earth.

The soldiers forced the toppling body backwards, dead limbs cracking at their force. The sabre was raised high again and twirled so that it spat blood. Then it plunged point downwards, carving into the torso and snapping through the breastbone. The officer reached down and plucked out the quivering heart.

Octavia felt it in her own blood, the knitting together of hundreds of tiny rituals repeated throughout the city until the nexus was woven. The warp and weft were bound, cutting into her own connections and besieging her as effectively as if she were one of the "non-combatants" in the Legation Quarter. There was no way out now.

Chapter Six

The sky was grey and half-lit, all shades of colours fading into one murky twilight. Up ahead, the cool yellow lanterns guided hurrying, indistinct figures homewards, back towards the tombstone-buildings. There were guardians at the postern gate, guardians of the human variety, stopping every figure and checking their features. A few servants were bobbing and bowing and arguing to be let back in, but it seemed that many more had finally grown too afraid of the red death-notices to stay any longer.

The unknown soldier on the gate nodded Octavia through simply, she suspected, because of the paleness of her skin. She stepped past the rising sandbags within, and recognised a servant hurrying across the courtyard as one of the Grieves', a man whose blood Ursula had "captured". But it was far too soon for the fixer to have prepped the Red Burial. Besides, Octavia could always recognise her cadre even when they were clad in others' blood.

'Oh, Miss Sutherland!' Miss Munroe was at the door to the Minister's house, directing the unloading of a wheelbarrow of possessions. 'I'm afraid we're all having to squeeze up a little. Poor Mrs Grieves! Her area is quite overrun, half the servants have deserted her after getting those dreadful warnings! It's like the Sepoy mutiny all over -'

Octavia was already looking over the carted belongings. There were overfull trunks held shut by their straps. There were suitcases, books tied into bundles and hatboxes. The bound legs of a tripod poked out at the bottom, suggesting a hurriedly-hidden camera.

'What about the artefacts from the Pyramid?' she asked, cutting through Miss Munroe's continuing burble. Miss Munroe looked blankly at her.

'There was a casket,' Octavia prompted, 'and a mummy, and some warriors. All sorts of little pieces.'

'I've not seen anything like that.'

They found Mrs Grieves in the parlour, semi-prostrate on a couch. She was paler than before, and sweating. She was clutching a fan and a handkerchief in one hand. Octavia kept herself beyond the woman's reach, in case Mrs Grieves was still grabbing hands compulsively, and cut through the formula of polite greetings.

'Where are the artefacts from the Pyramid?'

'Oh my dear, there was no room for them on my cart. I have retrieved the photographic plates and my sketchbooks, at least, but

those things were just so heavy and awkward…'

'They're still at the house?'

'No, no. Christién was bringing them, with some of the servants. It's been arranged to store them in Sir Claude's storerooms, I believe. Isn't he here yet?'

Octavia spun on her heel, not bothering to offer excuses, and hurried back to the courtyard. No-one had seen Christién. Sir Claude's stores contained a stockpile of rice, his archive of papers and a few rats but no ancient mummies, terracotta warriors or - most importantly - jade caskets.

She *had* to recover it. And recover her reputation along with it.

The soldier on the postern tried to stop her leaving the compound, warning her that it wasn't safe in the streets. When he tried to reach for her arm to physically restrain her, her shadow delightedly caused her to kick him on the shin. It was itching for a good fight, as usual, and all this late-Victorian politeness was making her grouchy enough to loosen its restraints.

The main street was empty, the walls bone-white under the rising moon. Octavia took side-streets towards the Grieves' former residence, walking rapidly but not so fast as to draw attention. She mainly saw shuttered buildings or hurrying Chinese. Sometimes, faces would peer at her from alleyways or from torn peepholes in paper blinds. They looked at her with fear and hatred, as if it were the Westerners and not the Boxers who were the aggressors here. There was the smell of burning flesh in the air, and the sky was ruddy with fire.

She reached the Grieves' former home to find the once-clean street filled with rubbish. An overturned cart, turned to charcoal, was half-collapsed in on itself. The contents were scattered across the road: cloth and books and baskets of food. The banquettes and furniture from the Grieves' veranda were there, smashed and scarred with axe-marks. Other, fleshly, remains were barely recognisable in the choking light but there were sticky pools of darkness which stank of copper and tried to clutch at her boots. She stepped over the blood, her skirts raised, and reached the gateway. The wooden gates were missing, so she entered the courtyard easily enough.

Inside, the ghost-screen had been smashed and burnt. The main buildings were still burning, the fire roaring as it drew breath from around it. The flames licked along roof beams and coiled about the failed guardians, caressing them. She found Christién easily, on the steps of the study. His headless body was brittle in death, the skin blackened and peeling to reveal glimmers of red. Wisps of clothing remained, burnt into his flesh. She didn't need to touch the corpse to

know what had happened. One leg had been broken before death, the shin bending the wrong way, and his hands were tied behind his back. She crouched to touch him anyway, hoping to find something in the biodata about the whereabouts of the artefacts.

'His head is in one of the trees,' Cousin Ursula remarked, as Octavia's hand connected with the body. 'You might have better luck with that. The stuff isn't here, though.'

'Why are you?'

Ursula put one hand to her breastbone in mock hurt. 'We've got a problem. You need to come back to the train.'

Octavia straightened, and stepped over Christién's corpse to reach the study doors. The wood was warped and still hot to the touch. Within, the beautiful fretwork and screens had been used as kindling. Scraps of burnt-edged paper spiralled in the breath of the main building's fire. The inner room was charcoal, radiating heat from its blackened bones.

'Why?'

'You remember how getting here wasn't easy? How I warned you about the changing force-lines?'

'They're locked. I know.'

'You know? Then why the hell are you still here, looking for your damn trinket? The train can't go anywhere, we've lost contact with the Eleven-Day Empire. We've got to lock down and await retrieval.'

'You really have no love for the fight, have you, Ursula?'

'I'm a tactician. I like elegance, not random beheadings. This mission is failing.'

Octavia shrugged. 'Where are my Red Burial?'

'Are you stupid? There's no point continuing.' Ursula touched her arm, lightly. It was a crude attempt at reassuring body-language, although it might have fooled someone who didn't know that Ursula had been trained in it. 'We should go home.'

Lifting her skirts with one hand, Octavia crossed the yard again, ignoring Ursula's final shouted command. Her shadow seemed pleased as it drew its sabre, but surprisingly composed. She'd spent years of her life searching for this casket, and it was too close now for her to give up for expediency's sake. She had to prove herself with it, and with the gaining of it.

In the street, she paused to draw a breath of unsinged air and considered the thin film of liquid fat glistening on her fingertips. Christién couldn't help her directly, since she had no time to perform

a biodata autopsy here. She could go back to the train to use the facilities and analysts there, but she suspected that Ursula would lock down its doorways and hold her until the relief force arrived to get them out. She picked her way through the rubble, choosing a way randomly.

'By the pricking of my thumbs?' she suggested to her shadow. It spun its sabre round in a complex figure-of-eight, though the rest of its silhouette matched her body perfectly.

They trailed through alleyways together, stepping over stinking rubbish. Turning near a burning temple, Octavia raised her skirts higher to jump over the slumped corpses of a missionary couple. The street she entered was chaotic, with people running and handfuls of Boxers running after. One of the fleeing men was caught by his queue and pulled backwards towards a group of rebels. As Octavia watched from the alley, they rammed a scroll of paper into his mouth and lit it. As he tried to scream, one Boxer spun a side-kick into the victim's stomach and another punched his kidneys.

Two men with red headbands and hateful eyes suddenly blocked her view.

One tried to grab her as the other drew his short sword. She spun sideways, into the wider street. She had more room to move here, and more light. Her shadow leapt forward, in synch with her body, its sabre blocking the man's. The man looked at her with startled eyes as his blade was jolted to a stop, inches from Octavia's skin. He muttered what sounded like a curse and drew back in his attack. She blocked a roundhouse from the unarmed man with her tensed forearm, following it with an uppercut at his unprotected jaw. He hadn't been expecting a Western woman to fight, and failed to block. His head snapped backwards. The armed man was bringing in his sword again as Octavia raised her skirts and slammed a side-kick into the unarmed man's stomach. Her shadow blocked, and then struck horizontally. A widening line of blood appeared across the armed man's throat as he tried to curse her again. Then her shadow was dropping onto the fallen, unarmed man and cutting through his torso.

Octavia moved on, trying not to be seen, but soon there was another man running at her. As she blocked his raised fist, she noticed that he had a different pictogram on his blood-red headband. Her rabbit-punch was easily deflected, and she backed away carefully, trying to sense what was behind her. The next blow fell from the left, another fighter's knuckles grazing her temple as she reacted too slowly. Her shadow went for the second assailant. She saw a slash appear across his chest, the shadow clearly planning to slash back towards his throat. It must have missed, as there was no blood and no gash

appeared.

Octavia stepped backwards. These two weren't responding as the others had. She'd already labelled them Trouble 1 and Trouble 2. Some blows and kicks found her, but none hard enough to throw her. As the fight continued, she realised she was being herded back towards the British Legation area of the city.

Another Boxer hurled himself towards her, screaming 'sha!'. He ran into a roundhouse punch from Trouble 2 and fell to the ground. Even as he tried to rise, Trouble 2 was smashing a side-kick down into his face, crushing his nose and jaw so that he rolled away in agony, unable to even scream. Why, then, were their blows being pulled with her? She tried to side-kick Trouble 2's kneecap, hoping to pop it and cripple him. In concert, her shadow leapt and brought down its sabre's pommel against his skull. He staggered, but continued coming.

'Better part of valour, my arse,' she muttered, as she found herself retreating in the direction they wanted. They were hard by the Hanlin Yuan now, and not far from the British Legation. Trouble 1 sent a bony elbow towards her temple. She leaned away, stumbling as Trouble 2 swung a low roundhouse against her soft calves. Even as her shadow leapt and she fell, the two men were running towards the building.

Pushing herself up onto her elbows, she blew her hair out of her eyes. She'd forgotten how annoying long hair was in a fight. More crucially, though; however much she would have liked to claim this as a draw, the truth was that the fighters had abandoned the battle, just as they'd been on the verge of beating her.

Ahead lay the high and decorated walls of the Hanlin Yuan, the thousand-year-old library of Imperial China. At its base, people were moving rapidly. She thought she glimpsed figures all in red, and more Boxers. She could see Troubles 1 and 2 running towards a group with carts, and -

- and it was Meng and his men. Next to the scruffy fighters she'd been engaged with, or the Boxers, their uniforms stood out. She climbed back to her feet, cursing her petticoats as they tried to trip her again, and hurried over to the nearest sheltered position. The whole area smelt of smoke. She could see the Commander directing the men as they carried large boxes and bundles from the cart and into a door of the library. Several boxes were body-sized, but beneath Meng's arm was a basket, just larger than the jade casket.

Annoyingly, her shadow was tugging at her nerves, warning her of something behind her. She turned on one heel, already pulling back her arm for a punch as her shadow raised its blade.

‘Good evening, Octavia,’ Morrison remarked, stepping back a little. He, at least, was watching her shadow as well as her. There were a dozen men from the Legations behind him, all armed and all scowling in her direction. Huddled beyond there were families of Chinese, clutching prayer-books like talismans. Only once he was sure that Octavia had recognised him did Morrison risk moving forward, to take her arm.

‘What do you think you’re doing out here?’ he asked.

‘Look over there, near the doorway,’ Octavia told him. ‘See? Meng has taken Grieves’ loot.’ She briefly toyed with the idea of letting her shadow run him through, but there were too many people behind him to see it, and he was too heavily-embedded in history for her to cover up his death alone.

‘Dusty bones and ancient pots,’ Morrison said. ‘There’s people dying.’ His eyes narrowed, as if reading her fleeting idea of getting him out of her way. ‘That’s why you’re here, is it? To get hold of some grave-goods?’

‘I’m not answerable to you.’

‘Whilst you’re a guest of the British Legation, you’re under Sir Claude’s protection and that means mine as well.’

He pulled on her arm, clearly judging that she daren’t make a scene with Meng a few hundred yards in front of them.

‘Let me go,’ she tried hissing, but he just smiled. He nodded to the other men, who started hurrying the families towards an alleyway.

‘We can go around the other side of the building, then cut up to Prince Su’s palace,’ he advised her in a whisper.

‘Or you could let me get on with my own little adventure.’

There was shouting from somewhere in front of them, and the group quickly flattened as best it could into the shadows of the walls. Morrison kept tight hold of her arm as he glanced towards the fire ahead. When he glanced back, she saw he had smuts of ash on his face, a cut on his cheek and a glint of a smile behind his eyes. He was loving all this.

‘You think this is just an adventure? I’ve got at least a hundred Christian families to safety, whilst you’ve been playing table-rapper. Prince Su’s letting us use the Fu to house them.’

Then they were running again, crouching low and stepping in filth at the edges of the street. The stench of the dried-up Jade River, the euphemistically-named open sewer that divided the British Legation from Su’s palace, rose up bitterly sharp and sour above the drifting smell of burning buildings. All the lanterns had been extinguished

across the Legation Quarter. As the straggling trail of people was hurried over the street, Octavia noticed that the sandbags had grown here as well, nestled within rising barricades of wood and stone. The main entrance to the British Legation was surrounded by the barricades now, and some Royal Marines were knocking loopholes into the long eastern wall so that a field of fire could be laid down. Paving-slabs had been prised up to be included in the rough fortifications.

Octavia had once been shown how every cobblestone in Paris had a number scribbled on its underside, so that post-riot the street surface could be quickly reassembled. She doubted they'd been that organised here.

Men were hurrying out, guiding the converts towards their temporary homes. Morrison kept firm hold of her arm, though, even as he politely let her through the gap in the barricades first. Within the broad expanse of the British Legation, the hundred-or-so soldiers were being deployed about the walls. Towards the south of the compound there were twice as many, scanning the dark horizon of the Tartar City wall for movement and holding their rifles ready on their shoulders. Morrison half-marched Octavia over to the shelter of the central bell-tower, still gripping her arm as if expecting her to fly away.

'So how important is your Great Game to you, Cousin?'

'As important as *your* Great Game is to the British Empire. All those escapades in the Himalaya. Agent versus agent, spy versus spy. Playing the locals as pawns just in order to get extra parcels of land.'

'Is that what we are to you? Pawns?'

'Oh, please, try not to sound so offended. You're a journalist, you know how these things play out.'

'Did you kill him?'

'Who?' She read his scowl. 'Grieves? I don't think so. Not yet, anyway.'

His hand tightened on her arm. She realised he'd moved her into the deep shadows of the trees, where the moonlight and starlight failed and the orange glow of the fires was too faint. Her shadow, which had nipped and prowled so strongly in the streets, was pinched and weak.

'You don't *think* so?'

The crackle and snap of firecrackers went off, echoing about the compound. Reflexively, Octavia dropped to a crouch, as the bullets bruised the air. Morrison was down as well, looking to see where the

shots were coming from. There was shouting from the gate.

‘Sir! The enemy has commenced firing!’

‘Thank you, Sergeant Murphy.’

Octavia stared toward them. ‘Grandfather preserve us from a *polite* war.’

Morrison pointed towards the nearest open doorway. Octavia nodded brusquely. On three they rose into a run, and hurled themselves through, while splinters of wood and plaster spat at them from the walls. They were in Sir Claude’s huge residence. Octavia leaned against the stair balustrade, and cursed her corsets as the whalebone denied her a deep breath.

Someone was whimpering further back in the hallway. Miss Munroe’s strained voice cried out in the gloom.

‘Dr Morrison! Oh, thank the Lord! It’s Mrs Grieves. She’s been shot!’

Chapter Seven

The field hospital had been set up in a large room of the Chancery, on the opposite side of the bell-tower and tennis courts from Sir Claude's buildings. The windows were shuttered to reduce the possibility of the wounded being injured again by snipers. Instead the room stank of iodine and open wounds, flies lazily drifting around them in the heavy air. The build-up to hostilities had given the medical staff time to stockpile the basics, but it was still inadequate for an open-ended siege. Octavia had overheard one remark quietly to Morrison that they were thankful there'd been no need for amputations. Yet.

Mrs Grieves, having survived the initial shock and blood loss, had been sewn up as well as conditions allowed and given a bed. Silk screens, delicately embroidered with flowers and cranes, had been brought in to divide the women from the men. And from the distressing scenes of makeshift surgery. Yesterday a local runner had been brought in, his torso slashed. He'd whispered his message as he'd arrived, spilling words through pink froth. The Catholic cathedral to the north-west of the city was entirely cut off, surrounded ten-deep by Boxers, all screaming for the death of the devils. Octavia had watched, annoyed, as the medical staff had done nothing.

'We have such limited supplies, we must keep them for the most urgent cases,' one had explained, changing the dressing on a leg-wound. Octavia had turned with impotent fury. She hated this, this narrow trap. On the heels of the doomed runner had come a retreat from one of the other Legations; under increasing fire from the Chinese army that was supposed to be protecting them, the Italians had abandoned their own building, fired it and sought sanctuary within the heavy walls of the British Legation. Already the Austrian and French were inside. Despite the heavy fire, the different nationalities spent endless hours bickering and sniping at each other. There was already a committee on food supply, busily discussing the matter of horsemeat, should the siege continue. It reminded Octavia of the Eleven-Day Empire. With the enemy at the gates, the important thing was to dispute whether the Military or Ritual Wing had the final veto on action. At least once, even the Doubtless Fourth Wing - a chapter whose existence could only be inferred by the traces of it in some of the better-established ceremonies - had managed to veto a resolution, although Octavia had no idea how.

The hallway of the Chancery was crowded as Miss Munroe led her through. Ever since being shot, Mrs Grieves had been asking for

Octavia to visit. Octavia had been reluctant, unsure whether she could resist openly blaming the woman for the fact that the casket was locked away in the Hanlin Yuan. She also loathed hospitals, loathed the idea of helplessness.

As soon as she entered the ward, she saw a soldier helping another to walk. And she was straight back in St Petersburg, helping the broken Anastasia out of the shattered Malachite Room.

Her former confidant had been limp across her shoulders, shadow dragging along on the floor. Anastasia's white lace dress had been saturated with blood, her hair damp and greasy with sweat. One of her knees had been dislocated when she'd fallen to them and begged Octavia to end it all. Only when the medics had run forward had Octavia realised just how extensive her own injuries had been. Her darker clothes hadn't shown the wounds so obviously.

Anastasia had been kept under guard until she'd been whole enough to go to the clock-tower cell at Westminster and await her condemnation. The surgeons had offered to remove the scars on Octavia, burning out the puckered flesh where her former friend's *sombras de cortes* had cut into her arm and reworking her synapses so that the sense of betrayal was removed. Octavia had refused. She'd destroyed her sister; it was only right that she should carry the mark of it. So she'd lain in the Westminster Hospital and despaired.

She *really* loathed hospitals.

Miss Munroe announced her just before Octavia came around the screens. Mrs Grieves was ashen, as if all the blood were slowly draining away. Her eyes were smudged with watery red highlights and blue shadows. She'd been shot in the chest as she'd crossed the tennis courts, the bullet smashing through the upper ribcage and cracking into the shoulder-blade. The doctors thought it might have nicked the upper edge of a lung, and her laboured breathing suggested they were right.

'Cousin Octavia. I'm glad to see you. Please,' she already had to pause for a moment to take some breaths, 'please, forgive me not rising.'

'Don't distress yourself, Mrs Grieves.' Octavia sat in the wicker chair beside the bed. Unwillingly, she let the woman take her hand. The hand was trembling, clammy and cold as if the life had already left it.

'I am not a fool. I know this wound is life-threatening. The doctors do not change the bandages often and why should they waste…' Another pause. Octavia could almost hear the blood bubbling within the lungs. 'There are people with more urgent need, I'm sure.'

Back when her mother had hawked Octavia to society as a medium, there'd been times when she'd been dragged to the deathbed of some upper-middle-class type and made to sit with them as they died. They'd demand to know whether their already-deceased partner was waiting for them, or whether there were angels about the bed. There'd been the occasional ugly scene with priests or clergymen, brought to take the last confession and grant the last rites. So she expected Mrs Grieves to start talking of her husband, to which she'd have to nod and make vague assertive noises. You couldn't upset the dying, her mother had slapped that into her.

'Please, Cousin, I don't want to join my William yet,' the woman urged instead. 'Not like this. Ask the spirits to bring me the jade casket.'

Octavia pulled her hand free, as if stung. Stumbled against her chair as she pushed past it, to flee the makeshift hospital. She paused at the main doorway, at least remembering to check for the sound of firecrackers and gunfire.

Outside was cooler, the cordite-rich air trembling with faint breezes. Dusk was falling, with the promise of some relief from the sun, and the guard was being relieved on the compound's walls. Russian marines and Canadians swapped cigarettes as they passed. She stuck close to the buildings as she strode over to the westernmost of the walls.

A wide wooden walkway had been constructed, so that watch could be kept. The Mongol Market beyond, normally a bustle of traders, was empty. Buckets of sand or water were ready; there had already been several fires set by the Boxers in the huddle of buildings abutting the Legation, and there was talk of burning them all, to reduce the risk of incendiary attack. Octavia climbed the ladder one-handed, the other keeping her skirts clear of her feet.

At the top she was able to breath the slightly clearer air. The first deep breath still nearly choked her, though, so she reached into the bag slung at her wrist. Lighting a cigarette, she leaned against the wall and watched the almost-deserted Imperial Carriage Park beyond. The dark walls of the Hanlin Yuan were hard by to her right, a shadowed monolith. Sir Claude had refused to agree to torch the library, for all that it was so close to them.

She heard the now-familiar tread of Morrison on the walkway.

'I know you're out of your time,' he remarked by way of greeting, 'but *must* you smoke in public?'

'Some of the other ladies do. Or would you prefer that they threw up from the stench of the bodies?'

The Jade River, which had never been a fresh brook, was becoming choked and swollen. Shot or burnt corpses were being dumped there by both sides. The dead flesh squirmed with parasitic life, and the air above them was dark, pulsing with insects. After only a few days, the more progressive of the women had quickly decided that the stricture against female smoking was a civil nicety worth abandoning, since tobacco masked the stench.

She felt Morrison still watching her. He nodded towards the forbidding bulk of the Hanlin Yuan.

'Why are those artefacts so important to you, anyway?'

Why was the casket suddenly so important to Mrs Grieves, that was what was bothering Octavia. She stared at the library as she answered Morrison.

'You doubtless think that, as people outside conventional history, the members of Faction Paradox are immune to the effects of time,' she told him. 'Never grow old, never die. Except that all we do is *dodge* time, step aside and let it run past us. Sooner or later it spots us, spins on a sixpence and comes back for us. Can you imagine being hit by thirty years in thirty picoseconds? Time leaping like a lion to trap you beneath its claws. That's when we start running. Or just hiding from it, in our lair outside history. An Empire scared of its own shadow.

'We *know* immortality can exist. The idea has seeped backwards into most human cultures. After the white death of the universe, after history itself has been exhausted, every human being is resurrected in immortal life. Call it Heaven, call it Nirvana, call it the Fields of Yalu. We can even catch glimpses of it, with the right rituals and tinctures.

'But… it raises questions. The immortality of the resurrected is a gift granted to them by Grandfather-knows-what, and who'd be stupid enough to trust to *that*?

'Besides, we're engaged in the War. We don't die, we're *destroyed*; our lives chewed up by history until we never existed at all. And without any existence in time, we can't trust that we'll be resurrected. But if we could have that immortality now, in this universe… think what we could achieve.'

Morrison had leaned forward against the wall, his eyes on the square below, as she'd talked. He turned back to catch her eye, briefly.

'And you honestly believe this is possible?'

'I know it. I spent years researching it. Hunting down lost texts, archives that even the Houses don't know about. You have your Chinese library, I saw you were careful to bring it from your house

when you moved inside the Legation. Have you heard of the Eight Immortals?'

'More ghost stories.'

Octavia folded her legs under her, falling smoothly to sit on the wooden walkway with her skirts spread about her. Morrison slid down with his back to the wall. Nearby, two soldiers were discussing the relative merits of their different rifles and Sir Claude was making his evening round of checks.

'Once, there was a band of eight immortals that roamed the lands of China. Each had gained their immortality in a different way. Li of the Iron Crutch was the most senior, for he'd been a disciple of Lao Tzu himself. Chang Kuo Lao was a hermit, who could make couples fertile. He travelled on a white donkey that he could fold up like paper. Tsao Kuo Chiu renounced the wickedness of his worldly life and became a scribe. Lü Tung Pin was also a scholar, but one who carried a sword with him at all times -'

Octavia's shadow fluttered at this, stretching up the wall behind them and swirling its sabre. Morrison either didn't notice, or simply didn't feel the need to react.

'Han Hsiang was his disciple, a poet. He climbed the Immortalising Peach Tree in the western mountains, but fell before he could reach the fruit. In his fall, he gained his immortality. And Lan Tsai Ho was a strolling minstrel, a thing of shreds and patches.

'Ho Hsien Ku was the only female. She ate ground mother of pearl everyday until she became as translucent as glass, and drifted into the mountains.'

'That's seven,' Morrison remarked. Octavia noticed with a smile that he'd used his fingers to count them off as she'd recited, and held them up now as if expecting her to deny it.

'The eighth was another hermit, the senior of Lü but the disciple of Li. You know, the hierarchical system is… well, never mind. Han Chung Li had been a powerful warrior, but had renounced warfare to follow the Way instead. He kept many secrets, including the secret of his immortality, in a jade casket.'

Morrison laughed, leaning his head back onto the wall. Octavia felt her shadow tug at her arm, but ignored it.

'That's it?' Morrison asked. 'That's your reason?'

Octavia turned so she could see his eyes, hold them hard with her own. He stopped laughing and sat forward.

'There's a lot more reason to believe it,' Octavia told him. 'The casket, the mummy, the pyramid. All of it should have been easy for

me to find. I've beaten explorers to the locked chambers of secret ziggurats on Aztec hilltops. I've sent Cousins into disintegrating praxis-liners to rescue some trinket or other. Atlantis, Mu, Eo? All just a twist of the knife and an incantation away. It's what we do. It's what *I* do. Yet *that* pyramid? *That* mummy? That *jade casket*? Nothing. Those Eight Immortals too, nothing. And the same kind of nothing. Just one hint of it here, now.'

Morrison shifted forward again, and she thought his hand was going to rise up to take her face. Miss Munroe had whispered to her, late one night as they rested on their now-shared bed, that Morrison was not quite a gentleman. Instead he looked her hard in the eyes.

'Did you kill Grieves for it?'

'What?'

'You did just talk of locked rooms and blood and so forth. You said you hadn't killed him "yet".'

He didn't get it, Octavia realised. And how could he? He came from a world which still thought Darwin meant European superiority, where science was making rational narratives out of nature. Wells' *Time Machine* had only been published five years earlier, and that contraption hadn't taken the Traveller into his own past. She rocked back from him, getting ready to stand. Her shadow was tugging at her quite hard now.

'Things aren't linear,' she said. 'It could be that in ten years, I run out of ways of trying to get the casket and kill him. Maybe some other time-active power did. Certainly there was something else in that room. But *if* it was me, it wasn't me *yet*.'

She tilted her ankles and rose up smoothly, putting out one hand to push away any assistance. Morrison didn't offer any. Her shadow was scowling, she could tell. Then she realised that, as she and Morrison had talked, more soldiers had been running to their side of the compound. She smelt hot ash carried by the breeze, and saw that her shadow was being cast not by lanterns but by a fire.

Morrison had risen as well, staring at the Hanlin Yuan.

'They've set it alight!' he said, rather redundantly, Octavia thought.

There'd been meetings, she knew, discussing the problem of the ancient library. But they'd agreed that the Chinese would never put torches to the Hanlin Yuan. A thousand years of scholarship. The westerly wind brought heat and sparks that suggested otherwise.

Morrison was already running, sliding down the ladder and pushing through the narrow gate on the northern wall. Bucket-chains were forming, heaving sand towards the crackling building. Octavia

scrambled down the ladder, cursing her skirts, and joined a chain. The rope handles of the buckets raised friction-burns on her palms, but she worked her way forward until she was at the edge of the library. The heat was sharp here, drying out her skin like sunburn. There was the acrid taste of burning varnish in her mouth as she breathed through it.

The casket was within the Hanlin, she knew it. Even now the flames could be flickering about it, cracking the pale mineral and letting time and smoke into it. Then the casket would shatter and whatever was within would be gone and out of her grasp forever. The bucket she had automatically been swinging forward clattered against her legs.

A US marine tapped her shoulder. 'Miss? We can take it from here, ma'am.'

They wanted her out of the line, back to the safety of the Legation. She nodded and stepped backwards, so that the line formed up again. Then she lifted her skirts and ran. Diagonally away from the line, towards the western corner of the building which as yet just smouldered. Black smoke coiled out of the shuttered windows high on the western face of it. Halfway along the wall, a recess indicated a gateway. Distantly, to the northern and eastern sides, she could hear the cheers and chants of the Boxers and Chinese army as they threw firecrackers into the blaze and praised the flames for reaching towards the Legation.

As she'd hoped, the gateway had been left wide open, so that the spirits would feed the fire and make it burn more brightly. She could get in. She'd have to concentrate to find the casket in the inferno, but she could do it, she knew. She ran forward.

The way was barred.

There was nothing visible, just an iron fist punching her backwards so hard that she fell in the dirt. Looking upwards, she saw the rafters outlined with fire. High above, stone creatures gazed down at her. At the edge, a dragon snarled down at her ferociously as the inferno claimed ten-thousand trees.

Chapter Eight

As dawn broke, Octavia was crouching before the still-smouldering contents of the Hanlin Yuan, the weight of Morrison's gaze on her head. He stood a few feet ahead of her, arms crossed and eyes scowling in tiredness. They'd both stayed awake all night. He working to put out the fire and she, bruised in body and spirit, waiting for the spine of the building to snap. She'd only left her vigil for thirty minutes, after the central beam had given way with a roaring crunch, to dig through her trunk for the practical clothing she'd buried beneath layers of camisoles and petticoats. Come the rising sun, the great library was so much burnt stone and ashes. Fragments of parchment, laced with crumbling black edges, fell like burnt snow into the foreign enclave. Morrison's cream jacket was smudged with dark smuts and Octavia's newly-donned black trousers were dusty with ash.

She rose and walked forward, her boots crunching into the disintegrating rubble as she pushed over the fading barriers. Pushing forward, she joined Morrison - who did not offer her his arm - and they threaded a course through to the inner courtyard. Already a couple of the academic types from the Legation, Jacobs and Hale, were directing soldiers to sort what could be recovered. Damp scrolls, some with scorched tassles or half burnt away, were being piled into one relatively dry corner. Octavia waved to the men, both of whom she'd conversed with over the sparse but interminable dinners in the Legation.

'Is there any sign of where the most recent acquisitions were stored?' she called.

They shrugged. One pointed towards the eastern wall, the gateway where she'd seen Meng the night the siege began. Some of the walls still stood, though the roof had collapsed here first, crashing through the levels to reveal them like a doll's house. The staircases hung ragged but almost intact at the corners. She re-slung her poacher's bag so it was diagonal across her torso, and pushed it behind her to leave her hands free. As she moved towards the wreckage, cracks and sharp pings sounded high above, and she leapt back as glazed green tiles slid down to smash into the ruins.

She turned to see Morrison, kicking at an overturned stele that had shattered the courtyard flagstones where it had fallen.

'Barbarians! To destroy all this…'

'Yes, never mind the beheading of random people.'

Morrison ran his fingers along the back of the broken statue, and

Octavia could tell he was resisting the urge to speak to her more sharply. He'd been angry with her all night; the heat of the Hanlin's fire seemed to have fuelled his annoyance at her and her methods. Yet they'd watched the final collapse of the building side-by-side.

After a moment he spoke again, grudgingly and controlled. 'Have you found your precious casket yet?'

'Not yet. I'm assuming no-one got to it first.'

'You try that side,' Morrison offered, pointing to the south-eastern corner, 'and I'll try this.'

Octavia worked methodically, aware that Morrison had given her the corner nearest the Legation in case a fast retreat was required. She scoured the ground floor first, treading lightly and ready to jump back as the upper storeys trembled. One room had been dissected by the fire; one side was black wooden bones and fluttery ash, whilst the other still had wooden shelving. Stacked on each shelf, scorched but intact, were black lacquer boxes. She opened one to find a metal mirror, its back embossed with symbols. Then another and another. An entire room of mirrors, perhaps unlooked-in for centuries. She picked up one with Daoist triagrams on it and slipped it into her bag. Perhaps she'd give it to Cousin Ursula, if the fixer needed mollifying, or perhaps keep it for her office back in the Eleven-Day Empire.

She took the fragile stairs to the next level, some fifteen feet above ground, keeping close to the still-standing walls where possible and lightly testing each step. She would probably land without injury, if the stairway did collapse from under her, but she was bruised enough already.

Then her breath hitched. In front of her, something glimmered green.

She moved gingerly across the warped floor, each ruined board singing out her location. There was a low, wide table, with thickset legs, tilting towards the abyss. A beam had smashed into it, cracking it in two. Silk which must once have adorned walls lay beneath the broken rib of the roof, and beneath that was the promise of jade. But it was the wrong shape, she saw as she got closer. Shards lay like shattered glass, the broken remains of a large sheet of the mineral. It was a darker green too, stained with the marks of metal at the edges.

There had been a table of pure malachite, in the Thirteen-Day Republic, and she and Anastasia had fought on it. Octavia had heard stories, when she'd finally emerged from Westminster Hospital, that the great table had cracked where Anastasia's surrendering knees had hit it.

She reached out to take one of the fractured jade pieces that lay before her now, her finger absently running along the shorn edge.

'Have you found something?' said Morrison as he joined her, the floorboards growling alarmingly under his additional weight.

'It's the bottom of the mummy's coffin, I think.'

They began turning over the wreckage, casting about the floor for signs of the other grave-goods. It seemed likely that they would have been stored together, prior to being re-interred. There was nothing.

'Can't you do your hocus-pocus with that?' he asked, gesturing to the shard she still held.

'You may not believe it, Dr Morrison, but I do need to perform a ritual first. And these are not exactly the ideal conditions. Sometimes regular vision is enough.'

She stood for a moment longer, as Morrison shrugged and left her, and tried to place herself in the burning room of the night before. No-one from the Legations could have taken anything. Very few knew of the artefacts' existence, never mind their importance. And she had watched all night to be sure nothing was taken. So the casket must have gone before the fire had been set.

She stepped back a little, leaning up to look at the broken ceiling. How could the falling beam have brought the silk with it?

Something snapped. Her left leg dropped, the floor falling away. She flung her weight forward as her right knee folded, and tried to spread herself across the remaining wood. Something heavy glanced a blow on her ribs. She could hear shouting below, as if from a distant shore.

She cursed as the floor crumbled away and took her with it. She tried to twist like a cat; feet first, then torso. She saw the sunlight was hitting the ground before she did, and her shadow grew stronger directly beneath her. She pulled her shoulders around so that her forearms would take the shock, and then her shadow was embracing her, buffering her from the ground for just long enough that her bones didn't break.

'Thank you,' she whispered, into the blackness just in front of her eyes. She got the impression it was deeply annoyed.

She lay for a moment, letting the smell of ashes and dead water fill her nose. Then she pushed herself upwards and sat back roughly. She was winded, nothing more, but Morrison and the others were crowding over her like linen-dressed ravens. She put out one hand and let Hale draw her to her feet. Something in her lower back promised an evening of pain for that flip. She noticed Morrison was keeping back a little, his eyes on the ground. On her shadow, as it tried to fall

naturally across the broken flagstones. Carefully, he was keeping his boots out of its spread.

'That was…supernatural,' he managed, looking up at her, and she saw the first waver of doubt in his previously amused eyes.

This wasn't, she realised, the first time he'd seen her shadow in motion. But it was the first time he'd seen it make a material difference to the world; the first time that it might seem to him like anything other than a trick.

'Just ghost stories, Dr Morrison?' she asked him.

At the mention of his training, he started. He held out one hand to her, palm upwards. She realised that she still held the jade shard, its edges cutting into her heart- and life-lines. With the realisation came the pain. It hurt to straighten her hand and take the jade in the other one.

'Can you still use it?' Morrison asked, stepping into her shadow to wrap a handkerchief about her hand. She winced as he tied a rough knot, and the cotton rubbed slivers of jade into the cuts.

Holding the fragment up, she saw her own blood sliding down it, slippy under her fingertips. 'It's contaminated. I can try, but there's so much of myself on it now…'

'I meant your hand,' said Morrison, offering her a cigarette from a slim leather wallet. She knew they weren't really calming; the relaxing buzz hitting her brain was really synapses breaking and neurones dying sharply.

She had to work out who could have taken the casket from the Hanlin. Assuming it had ever been in the Hanlin, and that Commander Meng hadn't taken it himself. There could be a dozen others involved, given how dense the study at the Grieves' had felt.

Two French sailors had been keeping watch from the Hanlin's southern gate, each leaving one hand on his rifle-strap whilst smoking. One of them turned into the courtyard now.

'Arrêt! Retraite! Allez de nouveau à la sûreté!'

The scholars were the slowest to move, clutching objects to their chests like beloved children. The soldiers who'd been helping them dropped their own cultural cargo, and grabbed their weapons in order to cover the retreat. Octavia thrust the jade shard into her bag and ran for the gateway. Morrison ran beside her, pulling a rather battered-looking revolver from his jacket pocket. Her shadow was running ahead of them, strengthened by the sun, and had its sabre ready as they crossed the alley between the Hanlin and the Legation gateway.

Two Boxers ran at her from the right, and Octavia dropped her torso

back and to the left as her shadow spun. Its blade caught the first attacker across the head, slicing through skin and skull. His momentum threw him forward, his stave still raised, but she was already throwing a blocking kick to push him away. Her right elbow flew backwards, catching the second attacker in the throat and making her injured palm shriek in agony. His own weight pushed her bone into his windpipe, making him fall back, choking. She was facing the Legation's gate again, and she ran for it. Somewhere to her left she could hear echoes of gunfire, the loud crack of Morrison's gun and the snap of the Chinese army's rifles.

The door of the Legation was pulled aside briefly, letting her through. Morrison stayed on the alley side, back against the shelter of the door's recess and ready to cover the way for the stumbling, hurrying academics. They ran clumsily, papers tumbling from their arms, as the soldiers with them lay down covering fire. From the wooden walkway high above, more Europeans fired down on the attacking Boxers.

Octavia waited by the door, scowling at the marine who tried to move her. She could see the still-open gateway into the Hanlin. The smashed courtyard was bright in the sunlight but beyond, in the dark shadows of the destroyed history, she saw a figure. Pale, dressed in white silks, its hair fell in soft walls about its face. It was human, female, and seemed to be casting about it. Briefly, before her view was obscured by Jacobs, Octavia saw the woman crouch elegantly where Octavia had fallen.

In the sunlight the spirit was faint, just a whisper of light over the harsh rubble, but there was something achingly familiar about her. Octavia instinctively tried to push through the retreating men to get to the woman, only to be pushed backwards by Morrison. He got off a final shot into the street, and then the heavy gate was slammed shut.

Chapter Nine

In the main hall of the Chancery, there were more wounded. Octavia stepped through rapidly, ignoring any greetings and passing into the main makeshift ward. Something was missing. She was only a few strides in when she realised that the silken screens were gone.

She felt a touch on her elbow and spun, raising her arm ready to strike. One of the nurses stepped back hurriedly.

'Miss Sutherland. Your friend has been moved. She's in an upper room of the Accountancy building now. The main floor, at the far end, overlooking the gardens.'

Octavia reached the building quickly. Downstairs, beneath the occasional whistle or crackle of gunfire, she could hear children chanting French verbs at the makeshift school. Upstairs whole households were crammed into each room.

Mrs Grieves lay on plain white cotton, propped up on pillows. Her thin hands lay in her lap, loosely clasped as if in prayer. Miss Munroe was soaking a handkerchief in water beside the bed. Octavia moved first to the unshuttered window. It overlooked a wide courtyard garden, with dark red maples and white chrysanthemums. She scanned the rooftops rapidly, checking that all of them were securely within the compound. The Chinese didn't seem interested in setting snipers, but it was worth looking twice.

'How is she?' she asked.

'Weak. The move hasn't helped. I think it may have reopened the wound. She's delirious.'

'They're letting her die.'

Miss Munroe folded the wet handkerchief and pressed it gently to Mrs Grieves' brow. 'I would not say that.'

No, she wouldn't, Octavia realised. These people would never think themselves so callous, even as they ignored the converts being killed for believing in a European god they'd brought or judged the Chinese barbaric for beheading criminals whilst back in England murderers dangled from ropes. The doctors were being pragmatic; there was a lot they *could* do, but wouldn't because they had limited resources, and there were new casualties lining up downstairs.

Octavia stepped up to the side of the bed, to look at Mrs Grieves' slack face. The woman was breathing through her mouth, each intake starting with a hitch and a low rattle. Octavia reached into her bag and withdrew the silk-wrapped shard. She'd hoped to find out why

Mrs Grieves had started talking about the casket, perhaps trigger something. If only the shard hadn't been so contaminated by her own blood, she could have used it and Mrs Grieves to triangulate. Tracing two biodata lines simultaneously was hard work. It required concentration and dexterity to avoid tearing off in opposite directions, but there was no chance of that right now. With Grieves and Christién dead she had no second source.

Mrs Grieves blue-veined eyelids fluttered, reminding Octavia of moths. The woman choked for a moment, and then she was awake. She gasped as if surprised at her own life.

'It's all right, Mrs Grieves,' Miss Munroe said quietly, taking one of the woman's hands.

'Mrs Grieves?' Octavia tried, leaning over a little. The woman's eyes slid towards her, away again and then back. They widened and she moved slightly, pushing her torso back into the pillows.

'The spirits!'

'Yes, Mrs Grieves, you wanted me to talk to the spirits?'

'They are amongst us. There!' The woman raised a palsied finger towards Octavia, her other convulsing in Miss Munroe's grip. 'See? The spirits of the tomb!'

Octavia glanced behind her. There was nothing but her shadow, falling against the painted wall.

'Mrs Grieves? It's Cousin Octavia, that is all,' Miss Munroe tried, but the woman was restlessly moving, trying to wriggle away. Miss Munroe took up the cold cloth and began re-soaking it. 'She's seeing things. I think you had better leave for the moment.'

Octavia shrugged, and returned the shard to her bag.

Walking back along the landing, she considered her options. There was blood back on the train, tiny samples being programmed into the Red Burial, but that meant crossing the city. And dealing with Ursula. Morrison had touched the casket, so his biodata *might* work, but he was unlikely to co-operate.

She passed an open door, and saw trunks labelled in Cyrillic script. Sorokin and his wife, she realised, as she translated the words automatically. Morrison had said that they were spies, that they had some secret agenda. He'd been trying to get the upper hand on Sorokin for months. If she could find something new, she could offer Morrison an exchange: information for blood.

She entered the room and sat at the dresser. If she were hiding valuables, where would she hide them? Three minutes' work uncovered a velvet bag filled with jewellery - half of which she

suspected was paste - a fine tin containing hashish resin, and some black cigarettes. Another two minutes and she found, slid between the silvered back of the looking-glass and its backboard, a sheaf of papers wrapped in oilskin cloth and tied with a leather strap.

She moved so that she was partially obscured should anyone come past, and grabbed a book from the nightstand. If asked, she was collecting it on behalf of Sorokina, to read to one of the patients. Then she swiftly unbound the package. Inside were pages upon pages in Cyrillic script, on paper so flimsy that it flew up like cobwebs at every faint draught. She recalled a dull night during one of the Second Wave counter-operations, Anastasia's impatient hand teaching her the script by rote. Below, in the school room, they'd moved on to a new verb:

'J'aime. J'ai ai aimé. J'étais ai aimé…'

Octavia began to see the angular marks as language again. The gist was that Sorokin was, as everyone presumed, here on the Tsar's business. Trying to discover what trade concessions the British had wrung out of the imperial court. There were notes on agents reporting in from the Himalaya, where the Great Game was still being played. One claimed to have found a member of the Ul-Mulk family ready to give Chitral to Russia, but Octavia suspected a bluff. At the back of the bundle something thicker caught her thumb, and she slid the papers aside to find it was a print. A poor copy of a daguerreotype, pasted onto card. Little Alexei, and Anastasia, were missing. She wouldn't be born for another year, he for another four. Even in this world, Anastasia didn't exist.

Octavia hurriedly rebound the papers and pushed them back behind the mirror. There was no family but the Faction, she told herself. No blood but the blood of ritual, no bones but the bones of giants. No loyalty but loyalty to chapter and house. Her siblings, those seven sisters and three brothers, were just non-combatants to her now.

Margaret Elizabeth had died before Octavia was even born, found blue-skinned in her crib. Effie, just two years older than Octavia, had fallen ill in 1883 during Octavia's eleventh year. The rooms of their tenement had death waiting in the corner, waiting as the fever had eaten her sister up. The bed they'd shared had been burnt, and Octavia had been moved to share with another. As Effie had faded, Octavia had started to shake. Then her convulsions had made her speak of futures and pasts. At first she'd been beaten for it, her father's belt folded over so only the leather strap hit. Then, as the money for Effie's medicines had run out, her mother had worked out how to turn her visionary daughter into a profit. Effie had died, wasting away with the fever, and for a time Octavia had thought the spirits she'd talked to were her sister.

After initiation into Faction Paradox, her new sister - just two years older - had replaced Effie in her affection. Then, because there was no family but the Faction, Octavia had walked away as Anastasia had died.

There was nothing for her here; no new information to give Morrison. The Russians wanted to gain ground, metaphorically or literally, over the British Empire. In fifty years all their empires would lie in dust. The Eleven-Day Empire would endure until the end of the universe.

But it wasn't enough. She didn't want resurrection, with all the doubt it brought over the concept of true identity. She wanted to *outlast* the universe.

There was nothing she could achieve until morning, so she turned back to Mrs Grieves; reading to the woman would at least occupy her time more usefully than fretting. In the back room, the shriek and crackle of the fight was dimmed to a background roar. Just the occasional whistle, as a projectile went wide, disturbed the dying hush in the room. Miss Munroe was still applying cold, damp handkerchiefs to Mrs Grieves' head, but now a man of the cloth stood beside the bed, head bowed and solemn.

Ministers of all churches were not hard to find. The Boxers had sent them scurrying like cockroaches towards the Legation's sanctuary. Octavia was quick to recognise the collar, the washed-out charcoal-black and the thin, sinewy hands of a poor Protestant. Too thin to be a second son, he was more probably a self-educated working-class man. Octavia had always disliked the Protestants, Presbyterians and Methodists most, out of all the ministers she'd encountered. Before her initiation, she'd thought it was for their hypocrisy, for denouncing her whilst they peddled similar lies themselves. At least the Catholics understood how to put on a show. Now she knew it was just her burgeoning love of ritual which had attracted her to the cloying incense.

Mrs Grieves was still starting, her automatic functions refusing to believe that the animus was departing.

'*Spirit!*' The word crawled from her, as if her organs and not her mind were speaking.

'The Holy Spirit is awaiting you, my child,' the man said. Octavia resisted rolling her eyes. She stepped up to the bedside.

'Which spirit, Mrs Grieves?'

Her eyelids were almost entirely shut, but her pupils pressed the skin outwards, so that Octavia could see the dying woman look

towards her.

‘Spirit of tomb,’ she managed.

‘Now really, you mustn’t distress yourself…’ Miss Munroe began, then trailed off, looking beyond Octavia. Octavia felt it behind her. A whisper sliding into her, her witchblood tingling with the promise of anarchic new data. The missionary was fumbling with his prayer book, mouthing uncertain litanies. Mrs Grieves hadn’t been calling Octavia the spirit of the tomb; she’d been calling it. And now, now it was drifting before them with its long, silken sleeves trailing towards the floor and its straight hair floating behind it, Octavia knew why it had seemed familiar. It was an anachronism. A relic of the future.

‘A timeship,’ she breathed.

It was drawing closer to the bed, disrupting the energy about it as it moved. Dark fronds of hair briefly cascaded about it, before twisting and coiling into fairer and more dishevelled-looking locks. Its clothes hissed as they slid over the floor. There was a smell of must, like long-shrivelled oranges. Was it tangible? Octavia knew she ought to reach out and touch it, but at a base level she was backing away. It leant over the bed, staring down at Mrs Grieves’ clasped hands as if looking for something. Then it was collapsing on itself, the silk folding away as if empty, vanishing into nothingness.

A timeship, it had to be. This ghost imprint was out-of-phase, perhaps, but the way the energy had distorted everything about it? The way all time-travel routes into and out of the area were locked down so tightly that there was barely room to breathe? It was typical Homeworld behaviour. One of their tamed, sentient timeships, sent to control an area so that the Great Houses could plunder what they needed.

Something had happened to it, obviously, something that had fractured it across time. Yet Octavia knew what it meant. The War in Heaven had come to Peking.

Chapter Ten

‘She’s gone,’ Miss Munroe said quietly.

‘Yes,’ Octavia agreed. Turning back, she realised that the other woman had meant Mrs Grieves. The priest was closing her frozen eyes with his callused fingers. There would still be energy flickering through synapses, dying sparks trailing along old routes, but the woman was dead. There was no-one in the room who had known Mrs Grieves well enough to weep at her death, yet this culture demanded oppressive silence from them. She’d been the last of the expedition, Octavia’s last link to the location of the White Pyramid.

“Old Betsy” - the bastardised gun built from spare parts - fired another mismatched round, the sound oddly muffled in the room of the dead. There were shouts from the barricades and from Prince Su’s palace, the crackle of guns firing. Octavia wondered, with brief panic, if the others were expecting her to say anything. The priest had folded away his ritual accoutrements and clasped his Bible to his chest. He clearly wanted to bow and leave, his duty performed. There would be more wounded and dying in need of the comfort of the cloth.

Did the “non-combatants” remember that the ghost of the timeship had ever been there? Had they even noticed it, at least consciously? Apparently not.

‘Miss Octavia! Miss Octavia?’

Octavia strode to the door, with ill-concealed relief, and hissed for the young boy to lower his voice. She closed the door behind her as she stepped onto the landing. ‘Yes?’

‘Miss, the doctor says you must come to the main courtyard right away. He says it’s important, Dr Morrison says.’

Octavia took the stairs quickly, faster than propriety allowed. Dusk had fallen over the city as Mrs Grieves had died, muting colours to greys and dulled reds. The gunfire was focused on the neighbouring palace, so the besieged in the Legation were taking the chance to get some cordite-laced air instead of the fug inside the cramped buildings.

‘Octavia!’

Morrison’s shout reverberated about the courtyard, and she caught sight of him. He was half-kneeling on the ground, hard by the gatehouse, waving at her with his left hand and grabbing hold of the tunic of a fallen figure with the right. She ran over, noticing that his blond hair was mussed and bloody, and he had the grim half-smile on his face that she’d come to recognise. He hauled the figure a few more

inches into the lee of the walls, supporting its back against his crooked leg.

'Octavia, may I introduce you to Mao Lie Wei? I believe you share some mutual friends. He was a workman on the Grieves' expedition.'

Octavia dropped beside Morrison, copying his pose. Mao was patterned with blood, some drying, some fresh. She realised Morrison's left forearm was slick with deep, arterial red. The hand he had twisted into Mao's tunic was holding the damaged chest closed, but she could glimpse the bright frothy liquid from the lungs bubbling through. It was amazing that Mao was even alive.

'How do you know? Can he speak English? French?'

'He was in the Fu, Prince Su's palace. Took a bullet to the upper chest. I've been working with the wounded, and this one was never going to make it. I would have left him there, but he spoke to me. Just a few English words cursing Grieves for having brought him to this. I've done what I can to keep him alive for you…'

Octavia saw the panicked, fluttering eye movements of the man as he looked in confusion between the two of them. His lips were spittle-wetted, and he was breathing high and shallow, like a bird. He had limited English, and neither she nor Morrison had the Mandarin to question him. The blood, though; the blood could talk.

The gatehouse was too busy, too crowded and too dangerous for what she wanted to do. She thought of the inner courtyards.

'Get him to the gardens at the back of the accountancy building.'

She rose to her feet and ran ahead. Barging into the building, ignoring the shouts and curses that followed her, she took the stairs two at a time. Miss Munroe - her face set - was drawing the plain cotton sheet over Mrs Grieves' face. She looked up as Octavia's heels skidded on the floor.

'Did you even know her first name?' she asked. Octavia ignored her, shoving her aside to kneel on the bed and rip the sheet back. Mrs Grieves' death-mask was sallow, the edges of her mouth turned down bitterly as if death had turned out to be a disappointment. Octavia tore at the neck of the bloody night-dress, popping tiny pearl buttons until she could see the drenched bandages across the shoulder. She pulled at them, feeling the clammy flesh of the body against her fingers.

'Scissors? Knife?' She thrust one hand backwards towards the spluttering Miss Munroe. But glancing back, she realised she could expect no help from the shocked woman. Instead she slithered off the bed and ran across to the sparse vanity table. A few basic medical

supplies lay there, and Octavia scattered them about her until she felt cold steel. A pair of long-bladed scissors. Back to the bed, where she sawed and ripped at the bandages until the hastily-sewn wound was visible.

She snipped open the stitches, pressing on the flesh to force the blood to well up. It was still congealing, only just starting to drain away. Holding the yelling Miss Munroe back with her right, Octavia plunged her left hand into the ripped flesh until she felt liquid that still tingled with biodata. It was fading fast, becoming a passive, dry history. She slid back off the bed and ran for the door, keeping the bloodied hand up so that it didn't touch anything.

She took the backstairs this time, twisting and turning to keep the hand uncontaminated. There were so many possible sources of corruption here, so many strands of biodata floating around which could destroy the usefulness of this dying matter. She couldn't risk her witchblood cutting loose from her control entirely, with so many tantalising strands of histories to play with. She could become lost forever.

Morrison had reached the courtyard. He had Mao propped up beneath the red shade of the maple and was kneeling next to him. As Octavia hurried over, he brought away his right arm and wiped his forehead with it, unconsciously smearing blood across his wet brow.

'There's not much time, Octavia. He's as good as dead.'

'Dead is fine,' she said.

She sank crossed-legged to the ground, on the opposite side of the body from Morrison. She saw his eyes go to the blood on her left hand, widening slightly. Caught his glance as he looked at her with something approaching horror. She half-smiled at him.

'As if you don't get your hands bloody,' she said, and smeared her clean right hand across Mao's chest, coating it thickly with his blood. She closed her eyes and focused on the ritual.

'All things are ready, come to the feast! Come for the table now is spread!'

She could feel her own biodata stretching. The witchblood, live and dangerous, cautiously picked at the edges of the two different datastreams she was receiving as if unsure of how much freedom she was granting it. Her left side shuddered, old and fearful, whilst the right grasped at her own as if clinging to life. She had to search for the right information from both people, find the common material and hope it was enough to triangulate with. Both had been at the Pyramid; both had, she hoped, had contact with the artefacts.

Mrs Grieves' blood was more familiar, with its Victorian romanticism, so Octavia *directs herself towards the dead woman first. It hurts, a dull ache colouring it a bitter blue and grey, and Octavia recognises it as grief and death-longing. Searching she finds a thin white line, faint and hopeful. She follows, and is in a gallery, high above the main floor of a museum. Below in the central area are many wooden cases, crammed with many objects, and a man is talking confidently about the many clay tablets on a desk in front of him. A stern audience is nodding at appropriate moments. Octavia leans on the rail to listen, and realises she is watching William Grieves arguing to gain funding for the Chinese expedition. She twists the wedding ring on her finger as she prays for his success. Not the data she needs. Octavia mutters new instructions to her witchblood.*

She is still on the high gallery. The building smells of beeswax and barely-dried paint. Gas sputters in new fittings. Below another man talks of the find in Nineveh, but all she can feel is the train ticket clutched in one lace-gloved hand and William's own hands taking her other. Mother had warned her not to travel to Oxford unchaperoned and now William is proposing. Again. This time, she acquiesces. The ticket spirals like a sycamore seed, to fall onto the top of a case, as he kisses her neck.

No, this is Mrs Grieves' longing. Octavia doesn't care about this information. She mumbles unconscious chants, looping back to the previous few weeks. She feels her witchblood kick against the constraints, senses that something somewhen has changed about herself but it doesn't matter because she's sat curled up in the back of a camel-drawn cart. It jolts and shakes as it stumbles over worn tracks. The rain on the canvas creates a constant drumming and the air smells moss-green and electric. Outside, the red hills are as dark as the blood she'll see coming from her own sweet William's body when he dies.

She shares transportation with the mummy and its possessions, a living companion in its dead travels, just as live wives were once buried. The object is wrapped in silk and cotton, bound with fine leather ropes. It glows. She reaches forward, fingers carefully sliding under the wrappings until she feels desiccated flesh. Too old even to crumble under her touch. And there, sharp white and shining green, is the casket. The tip of her finger traces the carving and Mrs Grieves relaxes a little. So old, so alive. The pattern swirling in never-ending loops.

Octavia grasps at the connection, twining it tenderly through her own biodata, so that she doesn't lose it. Now she turns to her other hand.

The old streets are narrow, rough cobbles uneven under her feet. She walks slowly, wishing to delay the sorrow she will see on her family's faces. All about her the sounds of other families rise from the hutongs, chattering and laughing or arguing over the day's events. She turns and pauses,

looking upwards at the worn red paint about the doorway to her own house. It is rain-faded at the top and scuffed with street-dirt at the bottom. She must remind nu nu to clean them. The courtyard inside is busy, two families sharing the one house, and the youngest children are still taking a lesson from old jia jia. Her wife, who looks old now as she should never have looked, smiles in greeting. Only the downwards twitch of her mouth reveals her disappointment. Octavia has failed again. Failed to find a job which pays enough to feed the family. Mother and father are sat in the last patch of sunlight to reach the courtyard, bundled tightly into their clothes as if it's deep winter.

For a moment she is a young boy, arriving home from her first day labouring. Her muscles ache and her feet drag so that she can barely step over the threshold, but she is elated. She presses sugar-coated fruit into her mother's hands and sees the pride in her success. Her mother is almost asleep in the sunlight now, too feeble to smile as she once did.

Mao will take the job in the north.

The earth breaks beneath her, opening to swallow her like a berry. It chokes, filling up her mouth and nose so that she grasps for breath. The other workmen are shouting and pulling at her arms, raising her back up. Octavia is close, she realises. Just a few more twists.

They dig through the dirt, scrambling in the dry air to haul out sandy soil.

'There,' Octavia instructs her blood, and she is in the tomb. Flickering lamps obscure more than they reveal. Mao has both hands on one corner of a wooden stretcher. Her feet stumble in the dark, and the other workmen are muttering darkly about the grave-robbing. As the lights fail, the heavy weight of the corpse jolts in her hands and she reaches out briefly to steady it. In the darkness, her fingers touch something cool even as her palm realises it is resting over the dead body's withered arms. Octavia grabs the contact, the sharp line of it glowing in the sudden darkness.

She has two thin, trembling links now, and begins new incantations to her witchblood. It follows both traces, weaving them together. She gets niggling tingles, little pops somewhere in her memory, which suggest it's taking the chance to work in a few kinks to her own biodata. She's getting flashes of the casket, though, sharp copper on her tongue like lightning.

Octavia opens her mundane eyes.

Morrison is there, a ball of gold and purple with dark iron caught in his side. She sees him as a tow-haired youth, callow and confident as he strides through the terra incognita that had defeated Burke and Wills, and as an old man on his last voyage to the mother-country. He tastes of saltwater and iodine, and the faintest tang of Edinburgh's morgues. He's staring at her with horror and curiosity. She could lean forwards and peel

his head open like skinning a hot chestnut, let the witchblood rework him as a reward. Already she sees changes, as Dr Bell removes the New Guinea spearhead that had lodged in Morrison's ribs for two years of voyages. She raises her gaze starwards.

She can feel the lines of force guarding and dissecting the city like barbed wire. Can see them, a subtle vibration sawing through the air with energy coiling off them like the sun's heat off tarmacadam. The vague tug she's been feeling since she arrived is solid, formal and natural. It dislikes her, wants to reject her from the land. She wonders… if she touches the lines, will she bleed? What powers them? She feels rituals in the air, saturating it.

Familiar prayers within - thywillbedoneonearthasitisinheaven - *which her unwilling heart knows from years of hearing. Offered with fading hope but determined fervour, and the scent of cloves and vinegary, watered-down wine.*

Outside, beyond the material walls of the Legations, there are a hundred-thousand prayers and chants being offered and bought and believed in. A hundred-thousand yellow leaves, each one sharp-edged with fervour. The rites of the Boxers are a darker force, gritty with starving sand and slick with powerful anger. They snap fiercely at her.

And high above, held in check by the roaring rituals, is the ghost of a vessel. Not the timeship. Something far less subtle. Heavy with darkness, searing with energy which cannot be unleashed. Trying to break the net cast across the city, and she can feel the pressure of it, a dark violet inside her eyelids. It's Prester John, it has to be, leading the relief that Ursula has ordered. Not yet, Octavia wills it, not yet. I'm so close.

Focus, focus on the thin green energy. These distractions are coming from herself, from the witchblood's ache to be truly wild. She can control it, can always make her emotional instincts subservient to her will.

'All things are ready, come to the feast! Come for the table now is spread!'

There is a skein of connections leading from the expedition, but she is moving forward to where the threads are woven now, towards the tight knot cradling the casket.

She rises, trailing after-images and side-effects. Morrison, a blur of purple, is talking but she ignores him. The sky, caught between the Faction battleship and the vibrating net of the chi lines, is pulsating. Cracks of bullets tear through it, reverberating until they come from everywhere. Their traces are fire-blue, gouging into walls and flesh and creating patterns through the swirling blood of the heavens. She could spend lifetimes watching the patterns grow and fade, the colours flux. So many people, so many intimate worlds to explore, to play in. It would be fun.

She raises an empty hand, watching hundreds of millions of cascading ripples created by her anachronistic presence. Beside her, lit from the burning palaces, her shadow raises its sabre. It twists the weapon about its wrist, flexing. She is a conduit. A channel focusing her blood into her shadow. Flesh is nothing, a trembling, passing physicality.

She moves, in that dream-state in which movement is effortless, towards the nearest outer wall. She senses Morrison, feels the dead body of Mao falling from his support as he rises to reach out towards her. Her shadow rushes forward, and she pulls an arm back to slow its attack.

'No, I must go,' she says. 'It's here.'

Chapter Eleven

It isn't far, in the mundane world of streets and alleys and rooftops. But she has to travel where the lines allow her through, where protective spells on doorways don't block her route, where Boxer rites don't shimmer and spark like solid walls across her path.

She gets over the north-western wall of the British Legation easily. The westerners' prayers are holding the wall as a barrier, but only one-way. The mumbled, fervent words are designed to hold intruders back and to speed the arrival of relief troops, not to stop people leaving. Her shadow stretches up the wall before her, lit from behind by the lights of the besieged, and grasps the top in its incorporeal hands. It reaches down and pulls her after, so that she rises lightly into the air and rolls over to fall into the filth on the other side, her bag settling about her shoulder.

The alleyway smells of burnt knowledge and spent gunpowder. The ruins of the Hanlin are before her and she can see the ghosts of its protectors, shivering in the ashes of words. They snap at the western prayer-wall, but fitfully and without power. Octavia can feel herself in the borderlands, Christian language plucking at her elbow with familiar whispers of beeswax candles and rosary wood, whilst in front and above and all around are the intonations of the Chinese prayers.

She turns towards the Forbidden City. It is the lodestone of the city and of the empire, great and heavy. A still, slow-beating heart to which she knows the gleaming green threads will lead her. Between her and it are the mundane streets, filled with fire and fighting, and the overlapping spirit-barriers. She steps into the chaos.

She walks steadily, taking the route least defended, where the protection is faint or wavering. She senses figures running at her, arms raised, and she tilts backwards, her rising leg blocking one Boxer's swinging punch. Her shadow falls on them instantly, slicing through with spinning hacks of its sabre. Octavia briefly wonders why she can hurt them, when she can see the protection spells they have cast coiled about them like blue armour. Bullets and steel blades cannot harm them. But her shadow's blade, her blade, is not made of steel. It is the spirit of steel, the spirit and shape and ghost of a blade.

Her shadow delights in the rhythm and pattern of the violence, and she knows it will dance tonight. She wants to free it. Everywhere there are burning buildings, fallen lanterns. Somewhere, behind black and unnatural clouds, the moon. Octavia knows her back is well-defended. She hears the yells of physical attack all around her, but it is separate. Her shadow will deal with all of that.

A string of firecrackers explodes into life to her left, and she spins to ward it off. Lit to deflect evil spirits, it spits and crackles at her venomously. The tiny explosions are bright, the glare causing after-images of glowing white inside her eyes. She raises her left arm to protect herself and shies away. She can feel its hatred hitting her skin like shrapnel. She and it are inimical.

There is a dragon-line ahead of her, crossing the narrow street opening. She slows to the speed of the people around her and considers her options. The shape is different, the shimmering golden scales of snakeskin vibrating gently as it undulates across the land. The energy beneath is familiar. She raises one hand to hold her palm against it. Earth energy, found surging across land on every continent. Here it's set against her, defending the soil from her foreign essence. She is a bad spirit and it will not let her pass, will not let her reach the Forbidden heart of the empire.

Reaching into her bag, her fingers touch edges, seeking familiarity of meaning. One lacquered edge connects with her buzzing fingertips and she pulls the object out. It's the mirror, small and octagonal. Her grubby fingers trace the triams which are raised up on one side. Yes, this is the thing. Casually picked up, then forgotten.

Holding it firmly, placing her fingers along the edges as instinct demands, she holds the mirror in front of her heart. It reflects outwards, a dull gleaming, then catches. The pulse of the energy wavers and she sees the change. The energy pulls and tugs at her fingers, trying to shift the reflecting surface or rip it from her; then the energy is deflected, and she pushes into the dragon-line. It presses against her skin, pricking and stabbing at her. When it releases her, she feels a fleeting loss. The mundane street is no different here, beyond the line, but as she slips the mirror back into her bag she knows she is closer. There are only the stern walls of the Forbidden City to breach now.

There are soldiers in front of her. Not the rag-tag half-starving Boxers, with their home-made charms and mismatched uniforms, but broad men in worn leather jerkins. They are advancing steadily, without haste. She senses that they see her, all of her. Some are starting to flank her, to get in position for the way her flickering shadow may jump in the firelight.

She stands, waits. She can feel them encircling her. Octavia wonders what the symbol on their headbands means. But she remembers the power of combat. She knows this heightened world; a world where her honed skills can act without complexity of thought. She flexes her toes within her boots, rises to the balls of her feet and then drops into a swaying cat-stance.

The first two men rush at her.

Even as she blocks one with a tensed arm, and her shadow drops the

other, she is pleased that they attacked together. Sign of a smart enemy. She aims a side-kick at a third, feeling the sliding crack as his unprotected kneecap pops. She spins and finds herself a few feet closer to the very edge of the street, recognising the wide, paved area beyond. And, on the other side, the huge edifice of the Forbidden City. Black in the darkness.

There are other men in uniform here. They are running forward and she feels the adrenaline rush through her at the impossible odds she is to face. She half-smiles.

Then she stumbled.

Octavia knew the time was not right for such a fight. She had more important concerns. Beyond the onrushing men were the high, solid, blank walls of the Forbidden City. She could hear faint, whispering peals of bells and music from within it. She had been following… something. The trail: the biodata of the dying, leading her to the casket.

She looked up and saw the latest soldiers falling on her attackers. They weren't government troops, and they were leaving the way free for her.

She ran past the fighting men, dodging faster than they could grasp at her. Her shadow was at her back, sabre whistling indiscriminately. She looked at the walls. The Forbidden City was well-protected. Physically, the sheer stone rose high above her and was - she suspected - deep. In the other world, the *illuminated timeless spirit-world she is slipping in and out of now, it is even denser. It tells her to stay away, not even to dare turn her face to it, and she is tempted to listen. She* raised her gaze again, annoyed that she'd let it drop at the place's suggestion, and searched for a way in.

The great gates were closed. Centuries-old wood barred her there.

She turned westwards, staying close to the purple walls. She heard shouting ahead, and flattened herself into the shadows. A crowd pressed towards her, a dark mass united in blood-hunger. She turned her face to the wall and waited for them to pass.

The streets were messy, choked with the debris of the mobs and with discarded possessions. In the semi-darkness, the shapes became black masses, luring her. One was a man. Had been a man. Dressed in fine rich clothes *that glint gold in the faint light. Too rich to have been on the street in these times without reason. Her shadow draws closer and* Octavia crouched by the headless corpse to see *why it has drawn her more than anything else in the chaos.* On its belt was a purse, the pouch silken in her grubby fingers. Within, she *finds an ivory disk. One side is plain, the other richly and deeply carved.* Behind her, she felt the barriers of the Forbidden City shiver and draw back from her.

It was power. Authority of some kind, which the spirit of the place had to recognise.

Octavia didn't even need to use the gate, but scaled the wall as if dream-walking. She drifted down slowly into the courtyard, her descent buffered by the resistance of the city to let her in. Her dark clothes melted into the walls, and she barely kicked up any dust as she landed. She could hear the fighting on the other side, more distant yet oddly clearer than it had been when she'd been amidst it. A faint breeze gusted through for a moment, and the sound of laughter and music drifted with it. The Legations had been full of stories that the Empress was continuing her normal routines despite the war.

She waited on the balls of her feet until she was sure of her direction. The casket was close enough that she could sense it without the biodata. She let her grip unravel, bringing the witchblood back under some kind of control. Yes, the casket was calling clearly, and she recognised the pattern of its energy-pulse. It was connected to the out-of-phase timeship she'd glimpsed. As she turned to face the strongest signal from it, her shadow redrew its weapon.

She chose a passageway between two long halls. Red lanterns hung in the heated night, and cast the paved path in glowing tones. She felt, more than saw, two figures approaching from the far end. Before she could register the clothes that marked them as eunuchs, her shadow acted; thrusting upwards across one chest, then sideways across the throat of the other. The ammonia smell grew sharply and Octavia realised that the first eunuch had lost all bodily control. Then her shadow was running its blade through the hamstrings, and the servant collapsed.

Octavia hurried. She ran through more courtyards, pushed her way through more protesting guardians - physical and spiritual - clutching the ivory invite as her talisman. She could feel time unravelling somewhere nearby, and the strong, aching pull of the casket. Was it causing the distortions? Wherever she looked, she still saw images trailing afterwards, echoes of the past and future. The ritual she'd performed in the Legation courtyard was still in her system, overlaying its own data onto those of her five normal senses, but it was fading.

She sensed the tick-tick-tick of time just ahead of her, and pushed into another courtyard. White-barked trees rose from artfully-pebbled beds, their leaves silver in the darkness. Light spilled from open doorways into the northern hall, thick cloying amber shades which jittered in Octavia's over-exposed eyes.

A grey-clad figure stood in the main, open doorway. A servant was

still falling at its feet with a collapsing gasp of surprise. The figure turned, and Octavia knew that this person was as illegal here as she was. The masked face was impassive. A whirring sound rose, then the sudden chimes of a clock rang out from the hall.

The other figure moved first, kicking itself into the air and then flying at Octavia, one foot sideways-on and outstretched. The strike was so swift that it connected.

Octavia dropped her shoulder, letting the bone hit the floor first as she rolled, limbs tucked into her torso. In the lantern-light her shadow regained its feet, bringing its sabre back to swing low, its edge aiming for her opponent's legs. The opponent was already airborne, legs tucked high under it. Mid-air, it twisted. One leg shot out straight ahead. The foot smashed into Octavia's face, sole-square on. Even as she staggered backwards, her shadow was rushing forward, cutting downwards. The shadow-sabre hit raised forearms, and Octavia was amazed to see the blade slide along them. She could sense her shadow recoil, stuttering in the flickering light, its movements uncertain. They tumbled into the hall.

All around them time unwound, coils of it uncurling with steady ticking of the clocks. The room was lined with them: ornate German timepieces, grand cabinets and pendulums with painted faces, delicate French roccoco gilt. The gifts of mercantile empires to the Middle Kingdom, candies given to romance the sour Dowager Empress into granting them access. All spilling time into the room at slightly different speeds, the fine brass clockwork imperfectly cared for by the Emperor. Frozen automatons, tin soldiers and circus dogs, were paused mid-march or in mid-fight. In a dim corner, a full-size metal man waited behind a chessboard. The constant, unsynchronised tick-tick-tick made Octavia feel less connected to her surroundings than ever. Her shadow was fighting well, dancing across surfaces after the other fighter, yet she wasn't working in conjunction with it. She was hindering it, not moving to keep the light-sources strong. Her consciousness was still all ritual, all blood and time and tendrils of experience. She saw her opponent's attacks, blocking them with the muscle-memory of defences taught by rote, but she wasn't interested in the battle. All she could see was the brightness, the glistening promise of the casket.

Octavia blocked a low roundhouse with her shinbone, raising it so that the other fighter didn't take out her kneecap. She followed the block with a straight punch towards her opponent's guts. As her knuckles connected with hardened muscles, she realised the other fighter was a woman as well. It didn't matter. The way was clear to the casket.

It sat on a plain rosewood stand, in the centre of the clockwork room. Old jade, an ancient green, carved into coils and clouds. Raised on the surface were a five-clawed dragon and a phoenix, locked in combat. It had seemed almost translucent before; now it pulsed to a slow time, lit from within. Octavia could feel it, the tightly-coiled spirals of power around it. Time tamed. The secret of immortality. Within her reach.

She dodged past the winded woman, extending her left hand towards the promise. She felt her shadow jump and fall back as the woman struck at it, finally realising who the real opponent was. As Octavia's outstretched fingers pushed at the paused air about the casket, she felt a kick snap at her tendons, causing her to stumble. Then her rival's hand was reaching forward, towards the jade. Both of the women touched it at the same moment.

It stung. Burned like frost on metal. Looking up, Octavia saw the dark brown eyes of her opposite. They widened at the sight of her own. At the tingling through their connected arms.

'You!'

Book Two: The Dragon Flies

Chapter One

Liu Hui Ying, first daughter of the first wife of her father, let Shen guide her to the palanquin. The courtyard of her kau fu's hutong was smooth, and brushed daily. The stone was the yellow-grey of a cygnet's feathers, blending smoothly with the pale lime leaves of the wide acer that grew through its centre. Had it been a normal day, she would have walked swiftly and surely across the fine gravel to the street doors, but the courtly Manchu shoes she wore made her shuffle forwards like an unreformed Han. Instead of the soft leather soles she was used to, these were fitted with flat wooden patterns, with a wedge set in the centre of her arch to raise her whole foot up. As was ever the case since they had swept in from the north, the Manchu wanted the admiration of the Han but would not countenance adopting their ways in full. Instead of breaking and binding the bones, they made ladies' shoes which forced her to walk as if with lotus feet. Liu was wishing now that she had not agreed to attend the Imperial Court.

There had been two days of intensive instruction from her uncle Xu, her mother's brother, in the correct recitations and rituals. Her mother's mother had spent hours preparing clothes before sending Shen, her own personal servant, to Liu before dawn. The old maid had scrubbed till Liu's skin had hurt, then rubbed in soft almond oils and blossom essences. Layer upon layer of robe had been arranged about her body, and each was more elaborate. Liu would have been diverted by the richness of the silks, if only she were free to move in them. Instead she was being guided by Shen, unable to navigate even the gentle courtyard.

She could hear the melody of kau fu Xu's favourite songbird, its cage already brought out into the yard for the day, and - beyond it - the rustle of Beijing's street life. It was a light spring morning. In Guangzhou harbour, the dragon-boats would be racing to welcome the summer and the westerners would be dressing in white for their ascension day. The hot heat of the high summer was days away yet, but the heavy court clothes made her skin prickle with sweat.

She stepped over the doorstep between the courtyard and the street, careful to place her unyielding shoes down vertically. The blue cart beyond had been sent by the court. Two bearers stood to the front and to the back, and another servant held a low step ready to aid her to her seat. The wicker chair was padded with blue silks, embroidered with lotus-blossoms and pine trees. As the bearers raised her, she sat stiffly straight and resolved to be calm.

Liu loved the hutong lanes; there were no such places in the south.

As she was carried through them, she caught glimpses through doorways into the private spaces beyond. There was the smell of fresh sesame buns, the aroma rising with their heat. She could imagine the pastry parcel breaking apart against her tongue and the heavy paste sticking to the roof of her mouth. It was a child's comfort food, but her mind and stomach were jumping like salmon in spring and she craved the simple reassurance of the sweet cakes.

They were leaving the hutongs behind and joining the broader roads leading up to Quimen. This was the capital which she always imagined. Her memories of the city were of the speed, the crowds and the noise all melded into one image that symbolised Beijing. Normally, she would be walking the streets, navigating between the venerable ancients who would not be rushed and the quicker traders who could never stay still. The ebb and flow of the people mimicked the harbour back in Guangzhou; she had spent hours watching as tiny junks had woven through the huge rigs of the foreign traders. The harbour had smelt of sea-salt and far-travelled spices, though, and Beijing had a closer smell. As if there were less room for all the different sensations.

The Quimen's shadow passed over swiftly, as they entered the Inner city. They turned eastwards, the bearers running along the deep red edges of the Huang Cheng - the Imperial City - until they reached Yung Hua Men in the middle of its eastern wall. As she was carried through the gate, Liu found her stomach wheeling unexpectedly, and she was grateful that the thick court make-up hid her flushes of nervousness. Once the cart came to a halt and she was guided out of her seat, she looked about for kau fu Xu, conscious that the elaborate board which dressed her hair into a fan was heavy and made her slow. Her westernised waves had been ruthlessly brushed out by her ngoi po when she had first arrived.

'Ah, sister's daughter. You are here.'

Xu had found her. In formal court robes, his back stiffly straight, he was subsumed by the authority of his position. He was no longer her stern-but-kindly kau fu but a Statesman of the Everlasting Empire. His thin shoulders were draped with power, the black silk disguising his ageing, wiry body. His beard was pale against the embroidered square sewn to the chest of his robe, and his broad, carefully-folded sleeves hid his hands. After the initial bow of greeting, he stepped to one side; behind him was a tall, sagging eunuch in the elaborate blue-and-gold robes of a senior. The eunuch had a neatly-shaved queue, the tip of the plait bound with fine black silk, and a deeply-lined face which suggested that he had entered service late in life. He held a fan in his thin hands. Liu felt herself flush again as his eyes raked over her

critically, giving her a hard, appraising look that would have been inappropriately direct from a true man. The intensive training took over and she bowed deeply to him, bringing her hands together, hiding her eyes from his aggressive gaze. She heard him sniff dismissively.

'Well, she will have to do. A city this size and we can't find a single suitable man. You had best repay my trust in your judgement, Statesman Xu.'

Liu knew then that her kau fu was bribing the eunuch to ensure his position at court.

'Liu Hui Ying, I am Li Lien Ying, the Chief Eunuch of the Imperial court. You will do as I bid you at all times within these walls, if you have any sense left in your polluted mind.'

Li led the way over the moat, through the Dung Hua Men and into the grounds of the Zijin Cheng; the Forbidden City. Kau fu Xu, with the slightest of winks to her, took Liu's arm to help her balance as they followed. She knew she ought to be listening attentively to the stream of instructions from Li, but he was reiterating what ngoi po had already run through with her many times: no eye contact, remain bowed until given permission to stand, forms of address. Instead she studied, through the corners of her eyes, the buildings and gardens through which they were passing. This was not the most imperial route, she knew, but it was of such luxury and refinement that she was unable not to be impressed.

Each brick was laid with precision. Each building had steps rising to richly-decorated beams. Some displayed gold patterns over a background of red, others repeated designs in blue, green and gold. Trees grew in pots so large that Liu could have curled up in them. Everywhere, even in the dry Beijing summer, was the music of moving water.

She knew with her head that such beauty was draining the country of its own life, but her heart glimpsed the delicacy of taste displayed all about her.

Li's fan hit her hard on the arm, even through the layers of silk.

'Her most illustrious and munificent Empress has been swift in her decisions lately, Liu Hui Ying, as one might expect from such a wise ruler. I suggest you have close regard for my advice so that her decision over you is favourable.'

Xu was nodding beside her. 'She is most honoured, Li Lien Ying, and will not forget those who are kind to her.'

'Pah!'

The Chief Eunuch had led them to a wide archway. Now he hurried them through, and Liu looked up to realise that they were in the square before the Taihe Men. The smooth, pale paving stretched for half a li in each direction, each square slab neatly aligned with its neighbours, so that her eyes were drawn along the lines towards the great red walls which bounded the vast square. To their left and the south were the five marble bridges that led visiting dignitaries over the Jinshui he, the Golden River; to their right and north rose the Taihe Men itself, its gold-and-red layers rising to touch the pale heavens and provide the Emperor with his own divine bridge. The sound of the river chimed with the sound of distant bells, hanging in the rafters of the huge gate.

Liu followed Li and Xu, her kau fu choosing to move ahead of her now. They hurried up the steps to Zhendu Men, the Gate of Correct Conduct. In her robes and pattened shoes, Liu was forced to take each step in turn, nervous that she would fall so close to the Hall. Her hair began to prickle with sweat, as if a hundred mites had awoken within it. They paused only for a moment, not even long enough for Liu to recover her breath, before they descended into the enormous ceremonial courtyard and crossed it.

The floor of the Hall was pure ebon marble. The yellow sunlight warmed its edges, whilst golden lanterns glowed within. Each dark red pillar was set onto a golden base, which seemed to float on the blackness of the floor. The pillars rose into the darkness high above, their tops hidden. Incense burnt from holders in the shapes of sinuous dragons, thickening the air with their scent.

Liu saw, as they walked across the polished floor, something glistening ahead of her. It wasn't until she passed the final pillar that she realised she was facing the Dragon Throne.

It was as wide as the junks in Guangzhou harbour were long, and as high as her uplifted arms would be able to reach. Raised on a dais, it was backed with screens of golden filigree. Above it, two gigantic carved dragons toyed with a huge pearl, and the sunlight drifted slowly through the incense-smoke. The very heart of the Empire, the seat from which power radiated. Deep cushions of golden silk waited to be used.

Li consulted with another richly-clad eunuch before turning to them. 'Her Imperial Majesty is busy. You will wait.'

To either side of the Dragon Throne, lined up neatly, were rank upon rank of ebony stools upon which sat civil servants of the peacock rank and soldiers of the leopard rank. At first they were so still that she thought they were statues, until a soldier moved and his leather

creaked like a gunshot in the echoing hall. A few women with downcast eyes sat with their hands hidden within the wide sleeves of their dresses. As Liu walked over to a free seat, she felt all the eyes of the court on her cautious step and blushing face. One lady's heavy Manchu features tightened as she clenched her jaw, and Liu knew she was trying to guess why a Han woman had been brought here. The Dowager Empress did not hide her admiration of Han men, but also did not disguise her contempt for the women. It was whispered that the late Emperor Tung Chih had died from the poisonous attentions of his Han mistresses, and that the current Emperor had similar tastes.

The Hall's silence was heavy, so that the occasional whispered conversation between people fell harshly to the floor. Liu looked to her kau fu; he was sat upright, but his eyes were half-closed and she knew he was wishing to be in the tea-houses instead. His hair was much more silver now than it had been two springs ago, when he had come to Guangzhou from Beijing. Then he had looked at her worriedly. The edicts reversing the reforms of the Hundred-Day Spring had become more extreme, and he had showed some concern that his niece would be at risk. Friends of hers had been executed, their heads rolling for holding the ideas of K'ang's reforms of the nation. She caught the tip of her tongue between her molars now, thinking about those few weeks of optimism and months of subsequent horror. She was about to have an audience with the Dowager Empress who had ordered the reprisals. She could ill afford tears.

Gongs rang out, hidden beyond screens, and the members of the court rose to their feet.

'The Dowager Empress approaches!' sang out the eunuchs. *'Long life to her most motherly, auspicious, orthodox, heaven-blessed, prosperous, all-nourishing, brightly magnificent, calm, sedate, perfect, respectful, revered, worshipful, illustrious and exalted Dowager Empress!'*

Quickly, the officials and soldiers, the women and Liu, all fell to their knees. She was grateful for the layers of clothing now, as it softened the impact of her knees on the hard floor. She put her palms flat in front of her and bowed until her forehead touched the cool stone.

'May her Imperial Majesty live forever!' cried a hundred voices as they sat back. Then down again. Liu caught a glimpse of golden silk, trimmed with pearls, as it swept past.

'May her Imperial Majesty reign for a thousand years!'

Up, then back down. Liu's brow was smarting now, as if she had held ice against it for too long a time.

'Eternal life to her Imperial Majesty!'

There was the rustle of silks as the court rose. The soldiers in full uniform rattled as their swords settled back about their waists. A faint rasp as the Dowager Empress settled on the Dragon Throne.

They waited, standing now in her presence. Liu took every chance she dared to look up from the floor. The kingdom may have wished eternal life on her Imperial Majesty, but time had not slowed for Ci Xi. She had the thickset features of a Manchu. Her eyes were widely-set, her mouth broad and with a slight overbite. Her cheeks, once said to have been as round as a peach, were falling to leave deep grooves from nose to chin. She wore the traditional make-up of the court, just a thick rouge dot at the centre of her lower lip; her robes were exquisite; yellow silk, embroidered in red with the symbols of eternity; her jewellery-laden fingers were tipped with long, tapering nail-guards of filigree gold, inlaid with jade. Her darker skin stood out against the gold of the Throne.

'Xu Dian Ning, your majesty,' the Chief Eunuch told her. 'The negotiator you requested, madam, for the north-west tomb.'

'Ah yes.' It was the first time Liu had heard the Dowager Empress' voice. It was clear and firm. 'Where is Commander Meng?'

A soldier of the leopard rank hurried forward, and kow-towed seven times. He wore the full uniform of a bannerman and saluted as he rose. One of the civil servants, whom Liu had heard addressed as Jung Lu, leaned over and spoke quietly to Ci Xi.

'And Liu Hui Ying? Very well. Come forwards, girl.'

Liu took a few steps forward and kow-towed three more times. Her head-dress weighed more heavily at each knock, and she was aware that the blood was colouring her face. She stood.

'Look up, girl. Another Han. And you are to be the translator! Are there no men who could do the job?' the Empress asked Jung Lu.

'I am afraid your majesty's defence of the country from the influence of the foreigners means we must distrust many of those able to speak their tongue. Liu Hui Ying is the most loyal daughter of China, and is skilled at negotiating with these heathens.'

'How did you learn, girl?'

'My father has the great misfortune to have only one child by his first wife,' Liu told her, 'and most sadly it was not a boy.'

'Did his other wives not provide him with a son?'

Liu's father had only taken his second wife after his first had died, eschewing the tradition of taking multiple wives just as he had ignored the tradition of binding the feet of his daughter. Liu knew the Dowager Empress had been Hsien Feng's fifth wife, chosen on the

same day as his other eight, and the only one to have provided him with a son.

'My father's second wife did honour us with a son, your highness, but he was taken from us at a young age. With no son to honour him, my father regretfully sent me for schooling. I have spent the last two years as a translator in his shipping company.'

'You are southern, are you not?'

'Yes, your majesty. From the port of Guangzhou.'

The Dowager Empress frowned. 'Ha, Yangcheng. The Southern wind has not favoured our court of late, instead stirring up the leaves. Are you a troublesome breeze, Liu Hui Ying?'

'No, your majesty.'

The Dowager Empress held her gaze for a moment longer before dismissing her.

'Xu, Meng. Grave news has come from the north-west. Foreigners often walk through our land as if it were their own, usurping our sacred sites and tearing away our people. The foreign dogs worry at the body of China, trying to take bites from it. Already we have lost face in Shantung and Kwangchouwan to their bared teeth.

'Now they are no longer content with the flesh but dig for bones, like a scavenger. Our sacred history is being stolen by these alleged scholars. One Grieves, from the British, has violated the sacred tombs of our ancestors and removed from it precious artefacts. The very lands have wept at such defilement. Such disobedient dogs would be punished by any just owner, and we would return this one to its leash.

'However, we must not wrestle over the sacred remains of our ancestors but treat them with the due reverence these foreigners have disregarded. We would that you, Xu, lead this delicate negotiation. With our good servant and your master Li Hung Chuang still in Kwangtung, you are to handle his role in this. My loyal commander Meng will accompany you, since the foreigner is more ready to comprehend our wishes when we illustrate their gravity with military force. The decree has been written and sealed.'

One long talon of Ci Xi gestured to Li Lien Ying. Li came forward and handed Xu a scroll. Liu caught a glimpse of vermilion pencil and the dark red stamps of the seals that authorised it. Every decree or edict issued directly from the Dragon Throne bore these distinctive characteristics; one reason the Hundred-Day Spring had turned to autumn was that the then-energetic Emperor Kuang Hsu, convinced that Ci Xi would destroy him, had written his desperate appeal for help using black ink. The military captain who had been aiding the

reforms, receiving a message without the official seals and vermilion pencil, had chosen to support the Dowager Empress instead. Kuang Hsu was said to be so distraught by the betrayal that he rarely attended audience. From that day two years ago, the Dowager Empress no longer guided the court from behind the yellow screens she had used for the previous fifty years but held the audiences directly, seated on the Throne itself. Now, her Chief Eunuch having given her decree to Xu, she leaned back and withdrew betel-nuts from her purse to chew on.

Li gestured with his fan, indicating that the audience was over. Xu bowed deeply again and Liu followed him obediently.

As they were guided away, Liu paused to allow Commander Meng ahead of her. She risked a quick glance backwards. The Old Buddha sat on the golden throne still, discussing something with a civil servant of the peacock rank. He had prostrated himself and Liu caught words about a governor to the north rounding up every foreign missionary in his region, ready to despatch them to their stale heaven.

'There is someone you should interview before you visit the transgressor Grieves,' Meng was telling her kau fu. 'The man, a peasant, was hired to help the foreign thief. On his return to Beijing, having seen the horrors the devils incurred, he redeemed his pitiful life by bringing news of this crime to the Court.'

They had reached the Tuan Hua Men once more. Beyond waited three carts. Liu noticed that her kau fu and Commander Meng had been granted four runners each to her two. Also waiting was a civil servant of the sixth rank; his hat-button shone as bright as a star on a winter night, as if cleaned each day, but his silk robes were worn. He bowed rapidly to Xu and Meng. Liu was not surprised to be excluded from this obeisance.

'Most honoured superiors, it is my task to bring you to the house of Tang Rui Biao, where you may interrogate the peasant.'

The carts turned northwards, leaving behind the Huang Cheng and venturing into quiet streets with private houses. Occasionally they passed temples, with chanting and bells ringing out from beyond the red doors. They were set down by a blue gate, which one of the bearers hammered on.

Liu waited for her kau fu and Commander Meng to precede her into Tang Rui Biao's house. The soldier frowned at her as he passed, his brow furrowing as a field in spring. He had yet to address her in any but formal greeting, and even in that he had been perfunctory. Liu had encountered this often back in the south; many an official had

been shocked to find a woman working at the Liu factory in Guangzhou. She would watch as a long negotiation with a British trader was protracted through these men's preference for a male translator. Her years of study caused her to wince at every pidgin use. English, with its insistence on glottal stops and curious grammar, was not as beautiful as Cantonese or Mandarin but it needed not be so ugly as some made it.

As they entered the main courtyard of the house, a thin peasant ran forward and fell into hurried kow-tows before Xu and Meng. Meng's sour visage turned briefly upwards at this, and he slapped at his sword with a harsh laugh.

'Get up. I am not your executioner.'

'Please, I am Mao Lie Wei. I wish only to return to my family beyond the eastern gate of the Zijin Cheng. The foreigners' great church is close to us, and I am afraid for my family.'

Liu smiled as her kau fu stepped forward, smooth oil over the abrasive sand of Meng. He glanced about and ordered a table set up beneath the wide-leafed Tree of Heaven that shaded the courtyard. He sent a boy off to boil water for tea. 'Come, sit with us and take tea, Mao Lie Wei. Then we shall arrange for you to be taken home. I am Xu, of the imperial civil service, and Meng here is a Commander in the bannermen. We just need you to talk to us.'

The large eyes of Mao caught Liu's gaze. She noticed his hand clutch briefly at his breastbone, like a man holding his favourite songbird to sense its heart flutter. Her kau fu turned to her and offered her the fourth seat about the table.

'My sister's first daughter, Mao Lie Wei. Liu will do us the honour of preparing our pai mu tan.'

Liu wanted to catch her breath at that, feeling the familiar dismissal of her status. Then she realised that her kau fu had manoeuvred it so that she could listen to Mao's story without Meng objecting to her presence. A servant hurried out with a cedarwood tray and fine porcelain cups.

The heat of the afternoon settled in the courtyard, the air thick like treacle and sour like overripe cherries. Liu poured the pai mu tan into the delicate bowls. Meng, she saw, drank his quickly; scowling at the heat instead of savouring the taste. Her kau fu sipped lightly. Mao, the peasant, trembled as he took up his cup. She could not tell if it was from the high-ranking company he found himself in, or from the remembrance of what he was about to tell.

Liu busied herself with her own cup, her head bowed so that it filled

with the delicate fragrance of the white tea, her ears open to the tale being told.

Chapter Two

‘Sirs, I am a simple man. The yarrow sticks were not auspicious when I was born. Yet, as each man must, I would do all in my power to improve the life of my family. My mother must be cared for, my father venerated. And it is hard to do this when fate has you poor. We live in my parent’s home; myself, my wife and our four children. My eldest boy is most fortunate, and I want him to study for the exams. I tell him of the exploits of the good and benevolent civil service men such as Li Jung Chang, that he may learn from them.

‘Last year, my cousin came to me. He had been working in Xi’an, with some foreigners. He told me the work was simple; labourer’s skills which I have learnt over the years. The white men paid well for the work, better than local men. He did not tell me that this work broke the seals of the worlds and let the demons of the lower levels into our own.

‘The foreigners arrived a week later. My cousin introduced me to Grieves, the leader and a scholar. He had eyes as brightly blue as the summer sky and hair as pale as sand. He spoke no Mandarin or Cantonese, save a few basic words which were course in his mouth. Instead, all his commands were relayed through Zhong Ju Mu, a scholar who we later learnt had lost his rank after the dangerous Hundred-Day Spring. Now he worked for the foreign devils whose ideas had caused his loss of face.

‘Zhong hired camels and carts, men and tents. As much rice was loaded into one cart as my family could have consumed in a full year. The foreign masters rode on horses, saddling them with soft leather harnesses, whilst the woman - Grieves’ only wife - rode in a cart pulled by four camels. Amongst the objects they took with them on the journey west were small timepieces in tiny wooden boxes, and something Zhong explained was an device for capturing the likeness of a scene. One day, early in our journey, Grieves’ wife made us stand before it. A few days later, Zhong showed us a thick piece of card, which smelt of the most foul stream and had on it smudged grey images of Chinese workmen. He insisted that those men were us, but the face he pointed to did not resemble the face I see in the mirror.

‘We took the north-west road from Beijing, towards the Heavenly Mountains of the West. It is the ancient route along which Muhammad and the Lord Buddha came to the Middle Kingdom, and now we followed it back, seeking other ancient wisdoms. Yet I was uneasy, for above us cried the wind, as the sky was cut by the foreigners’ binding metal ropes. It sighed and groaned as we walked, warning us that we

should not be taking the silver of these men. I saw a crow dive to a dusty river bed, never to rise again, and my heart whispered its doubts to me as we ventured beyond the Great Wall.

'The north-west is dry, sirs, dry and bony like a woman who has outlived her time. There is little water, and all about us the earth was ashen. We stayed in inns where the keeper would make a stew in honour of the number of his guests. The white men stayed with their own kin, in the harsh enclaves of their tortured god. In some of the smaller villages, the needs of our caravan were greater than the supplies the villagers could offer us, and we went hungry.

'Then we came to a small town, so old that it is in the tales of the Monkey King's journey. Here Zhong was commanded to hire more men, and it was here I discovered that we were to go into the red mountains and dry deserts. Here the bones of old towns lay buried in the sand, having died of thirst when the wells and travellers dried up. Grieves was searching for such a city. Now the unquiet dance of my heart became faster, yet Zhong was calm, and his reassurances made me fear my foolishness. I should not have trusted a man with no face left to lose.

'We went into the mountains. The air was cold at night here, and dry. There were no inns, so we slept in tents on the ground, with the heat of the day's sun seeping up from the sand. After many li, we came to the narrow end of a valley, and the foreign devils pressed us on through a passage barely wide enough for our carts. Below lay a wide, flat plain, and on it, a great burial-mound. It shone white as old bone in the sun.

'There was a spirit-road leading to it, straight and lined with markers. From this I knew that we had come to find a lost city of the dead. At the start of the road were two steles, but the white men did not show due reverence, instead walking up without bowing. My fellow workers approached as I did, with slow steps and a pause to kow-tow. Looking up after paying my obeisance, I saw the steles were marked with many and various signs. I am not a learned man and could only see that these were old and of great importance. With the size of the burial-mound, we knew it must be imperial.

'Several of my fellow workers remained on their knees, pleading not to continue. The spirits should not be disturbed. Grieves laughed at this and ordered us onwards. When some would not comply, Zhong whipped them with a cane switch, but still they refused. One of the pale men, the one who spoke a little Mandarin badly, told Zhong to stop. He let the men remain before the steles, and made them unpack his belongings. The rest of us, uneasy, followed Grieves onto the spirit-road with Zhong at our back.

‘Grieves would not rest, so we travelled at night, with the faint whispers of ghosts calling to us from the darkness beyond the path. Ahead of us the bones of the burial-mound grew larger until they filled the sky. We laid out to sleep at its very base, with its spirits hovering over us. When we had been on the road, they could not harm us, but now we lay spread out on the earth within their reach.

‘The next morning we were divided into groups, and Zhong instructed us to walk over the great burial-mound, looking at its surface for signs of entry. I set out with four other workers, across the lower reaches of the southern face. I thought that this would be more fortuitous than to be on the northern side, where the ill winds blew. The surface of the mound was of fine pale soil, with silvered plants so lightly growing that our every step uprooted them.

‘At first I thought the earth was slipping beneath my soles because it was so light. Then there was a great roar, as of a creature awaking, and the ground rose beneath us. Ma Jian Man, a worker from the villages, called out in alarm as the burial mound opened a maw beneath him and he tumbled within.

‘Our shouts alerted the foreigners, and they ran to us. We were sure this was a sign of the spirits cursing us for disturbing the rest of whichever great personage lay within. Ma lay in a great depression in the ground, blackened wood all about him. We hurried over to help him rise. As soon as he was free, he fell to his knees and bowed to the burial-mound, crying that the ghosts had clutched at his heart. He begged them to release him.

‘Grieves wanted us to continue, to open up a broken entranceway. We begged Zhong to tell them that we could not until the ghosts were exorcised. When he did not, we refused to dig. We had no monks or priests, but Lin Shou Ling had grown up by a Daoist monastery and knew some of the rituals. A few of us had a little incense, others beads or bells. One had a flute. We prayed to the gods and goddesses, and Lin led us in a chant. We lit the incense and drew signs in the air. We poured rice wine into the earth in patterns, and marked them on ourselves with precious water. We chanted again and again, until we felt the spirits withdraw.

‘As we came out of this, I saw Grieves’ wife with her equipment. I feared that her alien mechanisms had disrupted our rituals. I have since heard tell that the foreigners use their women’s magic to destroy our own. And this, I believe, is true.

‘We dug in the grave until we reached a warning-stone. I thought at this Grieves would at last stop, but he wanted to continue. That night, we made what fire we could from the ill-nourished wood we had

found on these empty plains. The air sighed about us, harsh and cold, as if the ghosts we had banished were tearing at our barriers. Then, beyond that, I thought I heard a woman cry. Lin warned us not to trust it; did not fox-spirits lure the unaware traveller with such sounds? I told him that I was a very wary traveller and did not fear fox-spirits in this land of the dead. Ma joined me, nervously, saying that he too heard something.

'We quietly moved towards the warning-stone, holding a feeble lantern to illuminate the way. Others followed. The moon which should have aided us was hidden behind clouds. As we grew nearer to the stone, the cry became louder, until I was sure that we heard the weeping of a woman and not the false cries of a spirit. The clouds parted and we saw her.

'Sitting on the warning-stone was the goddess Kuan Yin. She wore white robes and beads about her neck, wrists and ankles. Her hair was tied back with peach-blossom from the tree of immortality, so that we might see her face. One arm rested on her raised right knee, the other rested on the stone. When we saw her compassionate face, we wept. For the goddess was weeping; the tears falling over her cheeks were reflecting the moonlight. Beneath her bare feet, blossom fell and faded to grave-dust. When she moved, the bells about her wrists sang a sad night-song.

'We fell to our knees chanting her name. We knew what she was telling us. This resting place should not be disturbed. How could we go against our goddess? She who hears the cries of the world comes to those who call, protecting them against ill-winds and harm. Yet none of us had called on her aid. It must have been the spirits whom we disturbed that had called for her help.

'We pleaded with her. We explained that it was not our will to do this. She turned her dark eyes towards me and her teardrops contained stars, falling unhappily to the ground. Lin had begun to recite a mantra, "Namo Kuan Shi Yin Pu Sa", and others joined him.

'It was then that Zhong woke. He cursed at us, saying that we were a bad bunch and that he would have blind lame cripples over us. Then he looked towards the stone and saw what we saw.

'His eyes widened and his jaw loosened. Then he turned away from the goddess and began to chide us again. Beyond him, I saw Grieves emerge from his tent, his face blotchy red. He sounded annoyed and Zhong ran to him like the dog I now know him to be, and began to talk hurriedly. Grieves walked past him, and came towards us. He looked towards the burial-mound and frowned.

'Then he shook his head and turned away. I knew then that he

could not or would not see the goddess on the rock.

'The next morning, we were forced to remove the stone.

'The air stank of bad eggs and stale water, yet dry like moths' wings. After the visit in the night, many of us were reluctant to enter the burial-mound itself. Perhaps Kuan Yin was appearing to warn us of some dire calamity to ourselves were we to venture inside? I am now sure this was her intent, for beyond the warning-stone there lay two workmen, long dead.

'The foreigners brought the dead men up. They were like hollow shells, as fragile as dried seed pods. Ma, who had been thrown into the mouth of the mound, was most alarmed by these dead men. They had died as uncared-for as lice. Their unquiet spirits would be haunting us now, for the westerners did not pay respects to them either. Ma and several others would not enter the mound at all.

'That evening, Zhong came to me, and to others such as Lin. He offered us extra rice then, and extra taels of silver when we returned to Beijing, if we would enter the burial-mound. Lin readily agreed. He told me afterwards that though he had been raised close to a temple, the temple was not close to him. This worried me too, for if he did not believe in the rites he had performed then perhaps we were not protected from the spirits. I thought again of my family. My parents should be honoured, not walk threadbare like beggars. I took the silver.

'Over the next few weeks we carried from the burial-mound whatever the foreigners directed. Within were riches I could spend two seasons describing: gold, pearl, and jade so fine it sang out when touched. In some chambers stood armies of clay men. A few of these had fallen and smashed. Yet with each load I carried out, my heart grew heavier. This work was not good; my purse might be saved but my face was being lost, as surely as Zhong's had been.

'One night, the men who had been hired in the village were looking to the heavens. They pointed to the distant purple bloom on far-distant hills, and said that the rains were coming at last. We thought this meant our fortune was to improve.

'The next morning Zhong announced that we would be removing the body from the burial chamber. This could not end well, and we again pleaded to let the spirits rest. Zhong would have none of it. More promises of silver were made, and we went in. This was the first time I saw the body. Her skin was pale and her hair red as blood. She was dressed in fine funerary robes of silk, and held a casket of the palest jade within her withered fingers. The foreigners had already lifted her from her dais and placed her on a flat cart. As we prepared

to carry her from her eternal rest, there was an almighty crack, as if the sky itself had broken.

‘Zhong assured us it was just the storm arriving. Then the lanterns expired and we were illuminated only by the flames of the eternal lamps. I heard it then; a thousand exhalations caused the eternal flames to die.

‘Zhong began yelling at us to get the lanterns lit again. My trembling fingers nearly sent the flame into the waxed paper, and I cursed my clumsiness. No sooner were the lamps re-lit than they began to dance in the unnatural breezes. We hurried for the way out. Somehow the remains were carried forth. They were ahead of me as we ran, and my lamp shuddered in my hands as I tried to keep up. As I neared the warning-stone, I glanced back.

‘My lamplight swung, hiding and then revealing the stone warriors. Yet there had been no warriors in that first chamber when we had first entered it. Each wave of light revealed them closer to me, their frozen eyes staring vengefully into mine. I flung the lantern towards them and scrambled backwards, falling to the ground. My feet struggled against the floor, and then I was into the wet night air. I called out to the others but they had run for the shelter of the tents and structures. The storm was overhead and the rain slashed down as sharp as needles. It turned the dead dust to clutching mud.

‘Then I saw, lit up by lightening, the soft sides of the burial-mound shifting and sliding. The grey mud raced over my legs and held them fast. Ma, Lin and some of my other fellow workers had to run out and pull me free.

‘I spent the night sat close to the fires, hoping to frighten away the spirits that shook me.

‘We started back to Beijing the next day. All the stolen grave-goods were transported carefully on carts. Even Grieves’ wife often walked, so confined was the space she shared with the remains. The rain still fell, so that we struggled knee-deep in mud to escape the ancient valley. Beyond, the land was still dry. As we journeyed I felt that we were being followed. Before we reached the first villages, a few of the workers had vanished into the night without taking their pay. At first we were pleased that there would be more food for us, but each night another man vanished.

‘The first attack was not a surprise.

‘They wore the red headbands of the Righteous Harmonious Fists, and cried to kill the foreigners, and I knew this was the curse of the grave-mound. All of us who had taken part in the dishonourable robbery would be killed.

‘We made all haste down the roads, coming back to true towns at last. The rain and the curse followed us. The walls of the towns were thick with posters decrying the foreign devils and all who associated with them. When we came to the great road towards Beijing, the wind roared and the sky bled where the foreign cables cut it.

‘The Great Wall came into sight. I almost expected it to be barred to us, but the guards let us through. We carried the remaining grave-goods the last few li and entered Beijing. Zhong gave those of us that remained our silver. I went home to my family.

‘That night, I lay awake, the silver beneath my bed whispering to me that I was marked now. Each distant shout, every sound of running in the streets, made me shake. How could I use this tainted silver?

‘I rose the next day, took up the silver, and came to Tang Rui Biao’s house. I petitioned him. I asked that he beg forgiveness for me from the court. When I told my story, he assured me that the silver was mine, and gave me more taels for having come to him. I have remained here, in his house, these last few days. But now I want to return to my family.’

Liu stared at Mao Lie Wei. His hands still shook, quivering like feathers in a breeze. The tea in his hand split over the lip of the cup, and splashed onto the grey paving-slabs.

Xu smiled at him.

‘Thank you. You have done the court a great service, and I am sure your family will be relieved to have you home tonight.’

Mao stood and bowed to the two men repeatedly, before hurriedly disappearing into the house. Commander Meng turned to Xu.

‘We should have kept him here.’

‘What good would it serve? He spins a tale of ghosts and spirits. All the good information he has given us: this Grieves has taken things from an imperial tomb, and has them here in his house. We can send messages to the local governors in the provinces they travelled through to retrieve what we can, but the militia must have taken much of it.’

‘You have considered how to approach Grieves?’ Meng asked. Liu noticed that his hand drifted to his sword when he spoke the foreigner’s name.

‘I have. We will meet in the square of the ten temples tomorrow morning. I am sure it will not take us long.’

Chapter Three

Liu's cart followed Xu's through the streets. She opened her sunshade so that the waxed paper shielded her from the harsh flashes of sunlight, but it couldn't keep the humid air from her skin. She sweated inside the silks and blinked away the dark sand that caught in her eyes.

She couldn't discuss the mission the Dowager Empress had set them upon with her kau fu yet, not whilst his cart ran on ahead. Nor could she talk to him about her own, more covert, mission. He had protected her in the past, and would be grievously wounded were he to know that she had not come back to Beijing in full penitence.

She raised one hand, letting the fine inner sleeves fall so that they covered it. Then she held it against her nose to filter out the desert dust and the stench of the city. She knew she ought to be thinking about how this story from Mao connected to the rumours that had sent her northwards, but all she could focus on was how soon she could take off the cramping shoes.

They turned into the main street, facing southwards towards the south-eastern gate of the Inner city. They had only gone a few paces when the cart stopped. There was a hasty, muttered conversation between her two bearers, then an equally rapid and muted conversation with one of Xu's. Even if they had been speaking more loudly, their thick regional accents would have made their words hard for her. Raising the shade and lowering her sleeve, Liu saw that the wide road was blocked with people. Nearly all of them were heading towards the Temple of Agriculture's grounds, close to the wall. Small islands within the crowds indicated other people in carts, trapped by the rising swell. Her two bearers were trying to manoeuvre her backwards now.

'What's going on?' she asked.

'We are going to try a different way.'

'Yes, but why?'

'There is a demonstration of gung fu in the gardens of the temple.'

She noticed then that some of the young men in the crowd wore red sashes about their waists, or tied about their wrists. The signs of the current peasant cult. Ahead, the crowd stopped abruptly at the edges of a wide space, and she could see arms occasionally rising upwards. That must be the demonstration. She felt on her lap for her purse, and found a few coins.

‘I want to see,’ she told the front bearer, pressing the money into his hand.

‘They are crazy people -’

‘Please, I am curious.’ She slipped another coin into his palm. Ahead, she could see her kau fu’s cart pressing ahead through the crowds until it drew close enough to the edge to watch the demonstration. ‘Statesman Xu is stopping to see.’

The bearer shrugged and called out to his partner. Then they started moving her through, yelling and shoving at the people to part for her. Finally, they had her in a position where she could see the field.

The Temple of Agriculture rose in tiers towards the heavens, with dark red-and-gold detail and glistening green roofs. Banners petitioning for rain hung from it and moved slowly in the low breeze. Blue incense smoke coiled slowly under the eaves and drifted outwards, masking the street-smells a little. At the front, arrayed in rows, stood perhaps forty men and boys in loose street clothing. They wore red sashes about their waists, and bands about their heads and wrists. They were moving in unison, to the shouted commands of a leader. The form was simple enough, Liu noticed, and based on the northern style of fighting. There were combination kicks, intended to deaden a thigh or pop out a knee, whilst the fists and arms were used for defence or long jabbing punches. In the south, the emphasis was on arm-work and sequences of punches and chops; it was too humid, and the rice-fields too waterlogged, for expansive leg movements. Only a few si fus had successfully combined the northern and southern styles.

In front of the practising ranks, the real display was underway. These ten Boxers wore plain black tunics and leggings, as well as the red sashes. Instead of the fight form, they were calling on the spirits of dead warriors to inhabit them.

‘The fierce flames are as dust to me!

‘Bullets are mere raindrops.’

A few more of the cult were talking loudly to the crowd, or holding banners proclaiming “Death to the Foreigners” and “Support the Qu’ing”. Liu was not surprised that the Empress was torn between denouncing and approving the cult. As the chanting reached a crescendo, the ten mystical demonstrators began to run frantically through a series of moves, becoming faster and faster. She could discern no purpose to the moves; they lacked the focus required of a true form. Some of the talkers moved into the centre, drawing their short swords and swinging the weapons high above their heads, so that the hazy sunlight gleamed along the blades. The others drew

pistols, raising them high and firing once.

'Our rituals protect us!

'Blades do not harm us!

'Bullets do not touch us!'

The armed men turned on their fellow cultists. The guns fired, echoing off the temple's eaves and hiding the incense with gunsmoke. The fighters continued their frenzied dance, deflecting blades and avoiding the bullets. One of the men with guns stepped up closer, taking full aim into the chest of a fighter. He fired, causing a cry to go up from the watching crowd. As the roils of smoke cleared, the fighter stood proud and sure, panting from his frenzy but otherwise unharmed.

'Our rituals protect us! Blades do not harm us! Bullets do not touch us! Uphold the Qu'ing! Death to the foreigners! Kill! Kill! Kill!'

Liu waited obediently as her senior relations took the best dumplings from the bowl. Her relief at having been undressed from the court clothing - and Shen's help had been required to get her out of the many layers - meant that she was happy to sit back quietly and wait her turn. She had already described the interior of the Forbidden City at length to her ngoi po, along with the appearance of Ci Xi and how she had acquitted herself with the Empress. Her great aunt gestured for her to take her pick of the food.

'Is cousin An Nuo not here?' Liu asked, holding her chopsticks over the pot.

Ngoi po sighed, as she often did over her grandson. 'Flies never infest an egg without cracks. An Nuo is staying with a bad crowd. He has a skill for finding bad people. In a monastery, he would find the only corrupt monk. At least your fall made you wiser.'

'Yes, ngoi po.'

Liu plunged her chopsticks into the pot, capturing the dumpling she had been watching as her mother's mother talked. So An Nuo had been reprimanded by the family again. His misbehaviours were indulged; hers had resulted in two years of filial piety and bowed heads at table. At least she could guess where An Nuo was now.

'These fighters you saw,' Ngoi po asked Xu, 'they were unharmed?'

'Yes, mo. One was fired upon directly by another and was not injured. It was most impressive.'

Liu smiled at him. 'Kau fu, the pistol could have been loaded with a blank cartridge, one without a bullet in it. The British use them

sometimes in Guangzhou harbour, to frighten away scavengers or to honour their Empress. Like firecrackers.'

'And the swords?'

Liu shook her head and paused to finish some noodles. Her kau fu was a mostly rational man, a civil servant, yet still he tended to not think things through.

'Perhaps they blunt the swords, or hit with the flats of the blades.'

'There are times when you are too cynical, ngoi sang neui. Perhaps you have learnt too much from the foreigners?'

'I -'

'You had better keep you notions to yourself. At the moment the court favours these Boxers. It would not be politic to deny them.'

They ate for a few minutes. Liu keeping her eyes downcast.

'Eh, so what about this Commander Meng, hm?' her ngoi po asked.

'He is a traditional soldier, not one of these ones trained in the south. His men are good, strong and loyal.'

Dinner continued, with a long discussion of Commander Meng's attributes. His ruthlessness, his loyalty, his skill and cunning. Once the table had been cleared, Liu excused herself and slipped along the corridor to the room she had been given.

She waited until she heard the drum-tower dole out midnight. Ngoi po was a light sleeper, but took a water-pipe before bed. By now she would be in the deepest part of her induced slumber. Liu slid out of her bed, finding her street shoes quickly and silently in the shadows. She knew from earlier explorations that her kau fu still prided himself on maintaining the craftsmanship of the house, built by her great-grandfather, so that the hinges on her door would not cry out and only one floorboard would sing if she stepped on it.

As a child, on visits north, her cousin had shown her the silent ways through the building. He would sit in the main room, reading some scandalous book, and set her the task of sneaking up on him unnoticed from whichever room he chose. If she succeeded, her gave her sticky candied coconut as a reward.

She tiptoed quickly through the building and into the yard, without a whisper being raised.

The lazy yellow clouds were drifting across the moon, shading the courtyard in sepia. The carvings on the ghost-gate - the sturdy barrier within the main gates, designed to deflect evil chi - were glimmering faintly. As Liu expected, the street-gate was barred. She could hear the distant melancholy call of the night watchman, banging his gong and

chanting to beware of thieves and fire. She listened for a few minutes, waiting in the moon-shadows between ghost-gate and street-gate, until she was sure he was heading away from their street.

Then she stepped around the ghost-gate and into the moonlit courtyard. Turning on her toes, she took a few loose strides forward towards the street-gate. Her soft soles scuffed up a little dust as she pushed herself into the air. One sole used the vertical barrier as a step, and the other used the top of the screen to propel herself higher. A tile clinked under her foot as she landed on the roof of the gate, and she froze.

When no shutters opened below, she ran lightly along the ridge to the corner, then dropped into the shadows of the street. She moved swiftly through the side-streets after that, occasionally pausing to check the directions she had received, and sometimes slipping into a dark doorway when she saw lone people passing by. After a li or so, she began to approach the night city.

At first it was just a few signs. Lanterns were lit above dark doorways, and laughter spilled through closed shutters. Then she started to see more and more people in the street. Tea-houses spilled customers into the dirt roads, still clasping bottles of cheap rice wine. The cloying, sticky odour of opium hung in oily clouds, unmoving in the heat. The lights grew brighter as she approached the heart of the pleasure district. Outside the whorehouses, the madams sat in their finery and their thick make-up, their tiny, bound feet dangling. On the verandas above, the girls leaned over, calling to the drunken men from the tea-houses.

Liu took a moment to glance at the paper she had found underneath her pillow, then took a final turn to see the House of the Pleasure of the Bitten Peach in front of her. It was a tea-house, of a sorts, and she was grateful for that. A few girls, in flimsy silks slit high on the thigh, were inside. They sat on laps, or leant over shoulders at the gaming tables. A small, older woman sat on a high-legged stool near the doorway, robed in silken fineries, smoking a long pipe and watching Liu approach.

‘Mei mei Hui Yung!’

Her cousin Xu An Nuo was sat at a mah jong table, a giggling girl in his lap and a bottle of rice wine by his elbow. From the coins by his hand, Liu could see he was having a good night.

‘Biu go Xu,’ she said, bowing in a mimicry of filial obedience. An Nuo laughed.

‘Friends, this is my southern cousin. Is she not pretty?’

The girl on his lap pouted, and Liu realised there was something not truly female there. Her cousin, she knew, had something of a passion for the cut sleeve. He was still explaining her to his gaming partners. ‘Our family would marry us, hence my urgent desire to hide here when I knew she was to visit.’

Liu found herself blushing and scowled at An Nuo, unsure whether he was joking or not. He tilted his head and gave her the old, sly grin; the one that promised candied coconuts if she played nice. He shoved the girl from his lap, leaned back and grabbed a chair from another table, ignoring the yelp of complaint from its occupant. He slammed it down next to him, then reached forward and tipped his tiles face up.

‘The mah jong of the Nine Gates, gentlemen. Pay up and come back later. My pretty cousin and I have business.’

Liu took the chair and watched him count his coins.

‘A good evening?’

‘The best. You got my note then?’

‘How did you get it in? Ngoi po -’

‘My father’s mother is a drug-raddled old woman who cannot see that her servant has a blind spot for her grandson, and lets him in whenever he wants.’

Liu took a sip of his rice wine and winced at the taste. At her cousin’s gesture, a waiter hurried over with hot tea for her, and she nodded her thanks.

‘So, cousin, shall we skip the formalities?’ asked An Nuo. ‘You are well, or else you would not be here. I am likewise. You are still not entirely bound though, or again you would not be here.’

‘I require a favour. A message.’

‘To your friends?’

Liu nodded. ‘There is a man here, a soldier. It is Commander Meng, who was so assiduous in destroying the Hundred-Day Spring in the south. I fear he is looking to continue his old cause now.’ She put a hand on his arm, urgently pressing it. ‘You must warn them -’

‘Danger. Risk. Will you ever come to me with any other message?’ An Nuo sighed, with a lazy smile sideways at her. ‘Your worries have saved me from punishment in the past, and I’ll pass them on now happily. Are they staying where they normally do?’

Liu nodded. Taking up the tea, she took the chance to glance about the tea-house. A few curious glances were aimed at her, in her simple silk trouser-suit, and a couple of people were looking at her with scorn. She let her shoulders relax at last.

‘Are you truly well, biu go?’ she asked.

An Nuo touched her hand, lightly. ‘Go back, slip into your bed and sleep, mei mei. Don’t fear for me.’

She wove her way back through the streets, back out of the night city. In the gossip-houses, even in the far south, they still spoke of the Houses of Pleasure. It was said, as it so often was, that one of the Emperors had lost his mind dancing amidst the prostitutes and the opium addicts. She choose the lanes with the cooler air, where the poppy-fumes lost their grip. Taking a side street, she was surprised to emerge near the Temple of Agriculture again.

Where by day the drums and bells had rung in deafening crescendos, and fighters had fought into frenzies, now the field was quiet. Quiet, but not empty. From her viewpoint on the opposite side the wide street, Liu could see red-clad figures. They were silently performing a form, weaving patterns in the air and directing the chi energy through themselves. She thought briefly of the Shao lin monks who practised by moonlight, absorbing the night-energy just as practise by day drew down the sun’s bright focus. Then she saw the figure of the leading fighter in full, and realised that these were women. Some could only just have passed the threshold into womanhood.

As Liu watched, two of the women took a lantern between them, and the others gathered around. Then they were flying high, their long red sleeves trailing behind them, the red lantern fluttering between their hands. They caught it in the branches of a high tree, and fell gracefully back to earth.

And then Liu heard it, a faint whisper, coming as if from the distant walls of the temple. A simple chant, revealing the Red Lanterns’ affiliation.

‘*Kill*,’ they murmured, low but sure. ‘*Kill, kill, kill*.’

Chapter Four

Liu woke to the rhythmic swish against stone of the brooms at work in the courtyard. She lay still beneath the cool silk sheet and watched the faint shadows flickering across the ceiling as her kau fu's male servant, Liang, swept the yard. She heard clattering sounds below as the breakfast table was prepared, and then Liang calling out to Shen.

'There must have been strong winds last night. So much street sand to clear.'

'I thought I heard a tile coming loose,' the maid answered, and Liu winced.

She rose quickly and opened the inner shutters loudly, to quiet the servants. By the time she had dressed and walked to the main hall from the western wing, a kettle was boiling the tea and her kau fu was in the courtyard at tai ji chuan practise. She watched as he swept low to brush the back of his left hand along the ground, the right still held in a pincer high above him. Kau fu Xu was in his late fifties, she knew, yet he moved with an easy grace. He had studied for many years. She prepared the tea, pouring it as she heard ngoi po's lotus step in the passageway. As always when she saw the movements of her mother's mother, with Shen helping her to walk, Liu flexed her own feet and was thankful that her parents had defied the convention of binding them.

Xu made a final bow to the cardinal points, then came over to take his place at the table. The drum-tower beat the hour of seven.

'You father wrote to me that you were learning the inner forms yourself,' Xu remarked.

Liu dipped her head. 'I have learnt but a few moves, kau fu, and am in awe of your own hard-learnt skill.'

'Show me,' Xu suggested, moving one arm in a slow arc that swept the yard.

'With respect, kau fu, I am not yet -'

'Fish cannot survive in absolutely clear water,' interrupted ngoi po. 'I would see this too.'

Liu stood and bowed quickly to them both. She walked out to the centre of the yard, taking deep, slow breaths to focus. She faced south, towards the spirit-wall, then took a few moments to imagine the chi energy being drawn up her spine from the earth and flowing down through her internal organs. She listened to the distant cries of the street-vendors as they began their day, and the first songbirds being

brought out into daylight. High above, she could hear the leaves of trees fluttering.

She began the Yang tai ji juan form slowly, mindful that she was being watched and could not accidentally slip into the more practised external fighting forms in front of her unknowing family. She let her palms connect with one another, imagined the chi energy balling up between them. Then made slow turns until she faced the main hall, her eyes closed to allow her to concentrate on the moves. Once her muscles were moving in the familiar patterns, she relaxed a little, sure she would not reveal her true gung fu.

She heard boot steps behind her, beyond the spirit-wall, and faltered. She could feel new, disapproving, eyes on her.

'Thank you, Liu,' Xu said, calmly, from the hall. 'You may resume your breakfast.'

Opening her eyes, Liu let her arms fall to her sides and glanced backwards. Commander Meng stood by the gate, two lieutenants flanking him. She dropped her eyes and walked quickly back to the table, aware of the men's eyes on her. Xu was stepping forward and bowing deeply.

'Commander Meng, I am most honoured to welcome you to our home. Please, would you consent to sitting over jianbing guozi with us?'

Meng bowed, and Liu noticed it was less deep than her kau fu's had been.

'Thank you, Statesman Xu. I would be delighted to share food with you at some more pleasant time. I had hoped we might visit the foreign thieves at the first opportunity.'

Xu bowed again, ignoring the insult the Commander had given him. He opened his arms wide, palms to the sky, to indicate the courtyard. 'Please, ask your men to step within whilst you wait for my old bones to be ready to leave. Liu, have you all you require?'

Liu thought for a moment. She was dressed in a cream silk suit and already wore her street shoes. Her purse held all she needed, including her crib-sheets for less familiar English words. Then she saw the slight insistence in her kau fu's eyes and felt, beneath the table, the sharp tap of her ngoi po's fan on her thigh. Meng was attempting to exert his authority over the party by arriving early, instead of meeting at the square, as agreed. Xu wanted to force Meng to wait, to illustrate his own rank. She leant on the table, letting her wide sleeves fall over her own fan.

'I have left my fan in my room, kau fu,' she said as she slid it into

the inner cuff pocket of her jacket. She stood and bowed to the men, then hurried into the corridor. Meng's voice carried through the courtyard.

'Statesman Xu, I am most grateful for the suggestion that Liu would be able to translate for us. However, are you sure it is good for your reputation if she is seen to do this? You have worked with Master Li for many years, and through many treaties with the foreigners. I am sure you underestimate your own skills.'

'Thank you, Commander, for your concern. I would beg that you forgive an old man his indulgences; my memory cannot easily grasp the new words the foreigners keep creating. My sister's daughter is a crutch to me, just as a crutch may one day help you walk.'

Liu smiled as, hidden from the courtyard, she slid her fan back down from her sleeve. Meng could not reply without implying her kau fu was old, and thus his superior; or very learned, in which case he was also Meng's superior. She walked back quickly to join them.

The carts waiting in the street were poorer than those of the previous day, although now they were flanked by lines of Meng's soldiers. The men were arrayed in blue-and-yellow uniforms, with thick-soled boots. Most were armed with pikes, a few carried banners as well. She waited at the back as Meng and Xu subtly vied to be first.

The route was familiar, until they were close to the eastern gate of the Huang Cheng. Then they moved eastwards, along the edges of the Legation district. Liu saw high stone walls, painted white, and plane trees shading the streets. A few soldiers, British judging by their uniforms, were near one compound. She could hear the crowd ahead of them before they arrived at the gates of the Grieves' house.

Meng called out an order to his soldiers, and the men quickly forced their way through the people, creating a channel through which they could be carried. At the end of the line, Liu grew uncomfortable with the casualness with which the soldiers pushed the crowd aside, and the hard stares it brought her. She was aware of how her position was restricted by the cart, by the uniformed men surrounding her, by the social requirement not to damage her kau fu's face.

There was a chain of workmen with linked arms across the gateway, their faces a mixture of annoyance and fear. Meng's lieutenants reached them first, and Liu heard the men request entry. There was more scuffling and jostling around them, making her chair sway precariously till she thought it would be overturned and she'd drown in the crowd. Her ear picked out a few words from the muttering swell, but the people had northern accents and all she could understand were words like "dead", "murder" and "foreigner".

At last, after a loud comment from Commander Meng, a link broke in the chain. Meng's soldiers flowed like a blue-and-yellow tide to flood the gap, helping to hold both the crowd back and the way open. Liu noticed immediately, as she passed through the gate and around the ghost-screen, that the residence had been overtaken by the foreigners' presence. Servants fell hurriedly to one side when the carts approached. The wide courtyard was surrounded by a two-storey building, with a raised stone path running the circumference of the square. The largest hall had westernised furniture, disrupting the simple lines, but Liu's focus was rapidly drawn to the small cluster of foreigners gathered by the main doorway into the western - ancestral - wing.

The early morning sun cast dark shadows from the upper storey across the doorway, so that some of the linen-suited men were ghosts in the shade. In front, on the edge of the raised step, stood two men and three women.

One man was tall and broad, with the sun-brightened sandy hair she thought of as British. He carried himself lightly, sure of himself. The other man had dark hair and a slight frame. The way he stepped forward made her think of a still-young cat, spoiling to prove himself. She supposed these were Grieves and his assistant. One of the women was a Han servant, her head bowed. Her hand was being gripped by a taller Western woman, with a heart-shaped face filled with incomprehension. The last woman drifted a little back as the others were stepping forwards, and Liu got a fleeting impression of red-and-black silks and a sharp face frowning at her. All of them, Liu could tell, were preparing to hide.

Meng and Xu had already dismounted and bowed to the small group. Liu hurried forward and made her own deep bow. As she straightened up, she realised that she had instinctively given a fighter's greeting, with her left palm covering her right fist instead of palms together. She doubted the foreigners had noticed, but she hoped Meng and Xu had not seen it either.

'Sirs, Madams. I have the honour to greet you in the name of His Excellency Xu Dian Ning, Statesman of the third rank, and His Excellency Meng Rong Kuan, Commander of the Green Bannermen. These men are two of the Empress' most trusted advisors. We trust that you will forgive this unannounced visit, but matters of great urgency exercise our beloved ruler. We would speak to the scholar Grieves.'

The older woman gave a startled cry, and held a handkerchief to her mouth. The younger man stepped further forward and addressed them without bowing.

‘This is not possible! It is not -’

The older man interrupted the younger. ‘I am sorry that the scholar Grieves is not available,’ he said. He had a curious accent, neither British nor American, and dipped his head briefly to all three of them as he addressed them. His eyes flickered between Xu and Meng before settling on her kau fu as the main authority. ‘Please could you ask that the business be delayed until a later time?’

She translated quickly. Meng narrowed his eyes slightly.

‘They are hiding something. It smells of a battlefield here.’

Xu paused briefly to smell the air. ‘I concur. Liu, ask him who he is.’

Liu nodded briefly and turned back to the blond man. She saw that he had not broken eye-contact with her kau fu.

‘Statesman Xu would know from whom he is receiving these apologies?’

‘Dr George Morrison. I am here as a friend of the family.’

Even as she translated the name, Liu recognised it. She practised her English with the newspapers that the traders brought to Guangzhou. The news would be old, transmitted by wire to Europe and then brought back by ship, but the few reports on the Middle Kingdom helped her. Morrison was the one who wrote those reports; the *Times of London*’s correspondent in Beijing. She translated his name and status to the officials, adding her own comment.

‘This man is a journalist. He writes reports for the foreign press. If we act without honour or discretion he may write things with damage the Empress’ face abroad.’

‘You dare to offer us counsel, Liu Hui Ying?’ Meng asked.

Liu bowed her head as both he and her kau fu told her what to say.

‘The wise Statesman Xu and determined Commander Meng are most concerned that there may have been violence done to Professor Grieves. This house falls under the jurisdiction of our authorities, since it is outside the Legation walls, and they feel they would be remise if they did not investigate.’

Liu was surprised when the westerners gave way, stepping aside to let Meng and Xu enter the building. She followed reluctantly. She knew her duty was to be present, but could feel the sharp tang of bile rising in her throat at the stench of blood. She focused on the objects in the outer rooms, cataloguing them as she would an inventory of goods at her father’s factory. She could tell immediately that many were ancient, far older than anything her father was allowed to handle or sell to the foreigners. She noticed the woman in black and

red had stopped in the doorway to the inner room as well, her toes to the wooden bar at the bottom of the doorframe. Liu stepped up and looked within.

At the sight of the dead Grieves, his entrails spilling onto the floor, she closed her eyes briefly. She opened them again so that she could watch the way Morrison and the other western man moved when they spoke; she had found that the gestures of foreigners were often as expressive as their words. The amber light from the lanterns turned the spilled blood black, and softened the edge of the weapon that lay there. Xu was crouching close to the remains. He looked up at Morrison and spoke.

'The way this man died is obvious.'

'I think it is quite evident.' Morrison responded. 'When the room was broken into, the body was still settling. We need to know who did this.'

'Thieves?' Xu asked. Liu realised as she translated that the foreigners misunderstood her, and tried to clarify. 'Perhaps he disrupted a thief?'

The younger man was doing his own inventory of the room, and Liu watched him as he mumbled under his breath. Then she saw it. Unceremoniously laid on a trestle table was the ancient corpse from the burial-mound, stiff and serene in its death. Resting on its chest, held by sharp fingers, was the casket she'd already travelled hundreds of miles to find.

It glowed pale and faint in the yellow light, like a white flower in starlight. She would need to take a closer look, but from here it didn't seem to be a particularly fine piece of jade-working. It was priceless in meaning, though, and that was what had brought her northwards.

'I do not think anything was taken,' the young Westerner was saying, 'and the doors were barred from the inside. Grieves was concerned that no more objects should be stolen.'

'One of the statues is missing,' the woman next to Liu said. It was the first time she had spoken, and it took a moment for Liu to understand her accent. Quiet, with a burr and a rough edge.

Morrison crouched beside Meng and reached into the blood. His hand came up holding a shard of terracotta. It was curved, shaped like a broken saucer. He stepped over to the door and handed it to the other woman.

'The statue isn't missing; it's been shattered. During a fight with an intruder, I think.'

Meng straightened to his full height. 'Yet you said that the door was

barred when you arrived. Is there another entrance to the room?'

'None. This room is secure.'

Liu glanced about the room again, noticing the high filigree carvings which let in the light. The panels would be inlaid with wooden pegs, perhaps even sliding into grooves. She knew she could easily slip through if one were removed. She would be able to come back after nightfall and gain access. So it was possible that someone else had done so.

She thought of the Red Lanterns she had seen, practising their skills in the depths of the previous night. They would have found this locked room as open as a flood plain.

Liu stepped back respectfully as the men came back out of the room. Meng waited until they were all back in the courtyard.

'It is apparent that the scholar Grieves was aware of the loss of face he was bringing upon his family by his acts, and chose to take the only honourable course of action which could regain it: the taking of his own life.'

Liu tried to soften it in translation; she knew that the westerners did not have the same understanding of suicide. Their culture saw it as cowardice and an act that expelled the person from Heaven. Even though she rephrased it a little, the foreigners looked furious at Meng's suggestion.

'You should consider other possible reasons, if you are investigating his death?' Morrison asked, looking pointedly at Xu.

'There is little to investigate: I concur with Commander Meng.'

'There are gangs rousing anti-foreigner feeling in the streets of this city. Grieves spoke only yesterday of being hounded by a gang. It is the duty of a government to protect the foreigners in its country.'

'Our duty is to recover the objects illegally taken from the ancestral burial-chambers of the imperial court. We are aware of the strong feelings of the Righteous Harmonious Fists, but we regret that all expressions of concern should be addressed to the court through the Tsungli Yamen.'

Morrison stepped forward, his voice rising. 'A man has been murdered!'

'A man has died,' Meng corrected. 'His decision to kill himself recovers some of the face he has lost, but any claim to the artefacts is forfeit, and we would be most grateful to have them returned with haste so as to further redeem the scholar's name.'

Liu knew that the foreigners would not react well to this suggestion.

She spoke to Meng directly, ignoring the annoyed Morrison.

'This man is a journalist. A writer. He will tell the foreign press if we demand this too strongly. Our country will lose face abroad. We should not be too antagonistic…'

She broke off as Meng glared at her. His dark eyes had narrowed and hardened, and his back stiffened. He turned to her kau fu.

'It is not the girl's place to offer opinions. Just to translate our words.'

Xu turned to her. 'You heard the Commander, Liu Hui Ying. Please recall your position here.'

Liu blushed at the reprimand, bowing her head briefly to acknowledge it. 'With respect, I am offering my advice on how best to achieve our aims, Commander -'

'She is offering foolish foreign nonsense. I said she should not be used.'

She could sense that Xu was truly annoyed with her now, the anger shading his face. She hastily bowed her head as he rebuked her on her behaviour, her attitude and her shameful lack of respect for her superiors. Meng waited until Xu had finished, then bowed deeply to the foreigners and walked back to his cart.

'Now, child, tell these foreigners this: we deeply regret the misfortune which has befallen this household, and hope that the uneasy spirit of the scholar Grieves will be released from this world with the restoration of the ancestral belongings to the imperial court.'

She translated it, bowing yet again and then raising her eyes to watch their reactions. Most were scowling, although she saw that Morrison at least held her gaze levelly. The darkly-dressed woman was focusing on something just beyond her, as if she did not exist.

Liu walked back towards her cart and sat reluctantly. Beyond the walls she could hear a restless crowd, and she would have preferred to walk through it swift-footed, but protocol demanded she take the cart. The soldiers reformed about them and began to push their way through.

As they emerged, the crowd began yelling abuse at them. Yellow papers fluttered in the air and slipped beneath the feet of the bearers, so that the carts jolted and rocked.

'*Death to the foreign devils!*' she heard from all sides, in the harsh Beijing accent.

She braced herself as the soldiers were forced backwards, their weight pushing against her chair. Ahead she caught glimpses of Xu

and Commander Meng.

'*Death to the secondary devils!*' she heard, the guttural sounds being taken up by more and more voices. She felt trapped like a fish in a net as the blue-and-yellow uniforms closed in on her. The carts were pressing forward, but too slowly. She thought briefly of pushing up, leaping free like a salmon, rising over the crowd. Even as she began to put a foot down, ready to fly, she heard Meng shouting commands from ahead.

'Men, keep in line!'

The soldiers began smashing through the mob. Liu curled up within the cart, deflecting the missiles that began to rain down on them, and wished she had never come to Beijing.

Chapter Five

Meng led them back to the Huang Cheng, as anxious as Xu to report the events of the morning. They were carried there quickly, trailing the fading crowd like a comet's tail in dawn's light. The remaining civilians gradually disappeared as they approached the high purple walls, afraid to be seen within its shadows. After a hurried conversation on the gate, the three of them were ushered within.

They were led on a different route through the purple walls this morning, towards a hall in the north-east corner of the Zijin Cheng. The courtyard before it was unpaved, with lime trees rising up to dapple the sunlight and whisper court secrets to the subtle breezes. The hall was richly-painted in reds and blues, but what Liu noticed most was the black stain in the dust at the base of the steps. As they passed it and took the steps up to the hall, Liu realised where she had seen its pattern before, and recognised belatedly the smell of copper in the air.

Officials had come to Guangzhou in the sour autumn after the Hundred-Day Spring, as the light of the reform had faded. Men like Meng, and civil servants. The local governors had acquiesced to them. The governor of Guangzhou had been a good man; he had given the officials as little as he could whilst appearing to be as generous as a Prince. He had wanted to balance the orders from Beijing with the need to keep the foreign traders in his port.

A messenger had run to many houses, carrying verbal warnings which could be officially denied. The Po Chi Lam clinic had suddenly been understaffed, as fighters based there had undertaken journeys to the mountains to "seek enlightenment". The painted women who consorted with the foreigners had slipped away like foxes in the dusk. The printing-presses had taken to printing the works of Confucius instead of Sun Yet Sen. The boy had come to Liu Jing Mu's house as well, suggesting that his daughter may want to visit distant relatives. Liu's father had thanked the boy with a coin, and then advised her to stay in her room, to drop her contacts with the radical press, to cease studying at Po Chi Lam.

A few weeks later, her father had taken Liu to the main square. Not everyone had heeded the boy's whispered advice. Four men and a woman had been led before the crowd, and Liu had been at school with some of them. She had sat with them in tea-houses, talking of the future of the Middle Kingdom. But her father had made her watch as they'd been beheaded. The blood had made black chaos in the dust of the square, random and disordered yet heavy with meaning.

She realised she was staring at the same stain again now, and hurried into the hall after the eunuch. To the west of the hall, line upon line of women waited with downcast heads. Their clothes revealed their rank; from ladies of the court, in fine silks and gossamer chiffons which trembled with every breath, to their maids in simpler garb. As she walked to the place in the front row which the eunuch indicated, Liu saw that - despite their nervously-bowed heads - the women's eyes contemptuously followed her Han street clothing.

Opposite, to the eastern side, Xu and Meng were taking up their indicated positions. Had Meng contrived this? Plotted to bring them here, to whatever was causing the blood in the dust? She raised her head slightly, and looked at him through almost-closed lashes. He stood with legs braced shoulder-width apart and hands behind his back, head straight; a classic military stance. Yet he was shifting his weight uncertainly from foot to foot, as if stood on heated tiles, and his eyes were apprehensive. He had no more idea of why they had been brought here, instead of the audience hall, than she did.

'*Bow to his Imperial Highness Prince Tuan!*' the eunuchs shouted suddenly.

They dropped rapidly. Liu bit back a cry, as her unpadded knees hit the ancient wooden floor with a vicious crack. As her forehead knocked the cool wood, she tried to look sideways to see what was happening.

Prince Tuan was a notorious reactionary, who had risen to a position of influence within the imperial family after the Hundred-Day Spring had been repressed. As quick to anger as summer lightening, it was said, and only appearing in stormy times. Liu heard heavy steps across the floor; the sound of many men. The woman behind her whimpered, like a dog awaiting chastisement.

'My friends, my servants. Honoured guests of the court,' Prince Tuan began in heavy Mandarin, 'I thank you for accepting my invitation to come here. You all know that I am a most loyal servant to the Emperor, having served him and the Dowager Empress through the turbulent times. Now our peasants rise to drive out the foreign devils, to protect the land from their ideas. I can do no less. You may rise.'

Liu's scalp stung as the blood pounded through it, rushing back through her legs and making them itch, like hair rising before a storm. The comb she had used to hold her hair back was working loose so that strands fell free. She had not been expecting to kow-tow today, but she did not dare reach up to fix it. She kept her head bowed, sensing the others doing the same, but carefully risked a look towards

the Prince.

He wore traditional Manchu riding-garb over a silken robe to the knee; a leather belt, wrist-guards and even thick-soled boots, all dyed in a rich red and embossed with gold detail. He smelt of copper, horses and sweat. His broad Manchu features were weathered, and he had a long, thin moustache, as black as keemun tea. Behind him stood two rows of soldiers, dressed to show their allegiance to him, and at his shoulder were two officers. Each of the two captains held a heavy wooden crucifix, one hand where the arms crossed and one at the foot. She hastily looked back at the floor.

'I would scourge the Zijin Cheng of secondary devils, of those who have promised their souls to the tortured foreign god. For how can one dog serve two masters? The heavenly Emperor and his most beloved mother cannot be tainted by having such unworthy people working for them.

'How to seek out the secondary devil from the true and loyal, though? Having reneged upon their ancestors and brought shame on themselves and their families, these converts could tell dishonest truths to save their dishonoured bodies.'

Prince Tuan strode forward and pointed to one of the men on the eastern side. 'Are you a convert? What about you? And you? How do you plead?'

As he strode through the hall, pointing at random, the woman behind Liu who had let out so many whispers began a chant begging for Kuan Yin to aid them.

'See?' Tuan said, returning to his position and spreading his arms wide to indicate all the people in the hall. 'Not one of you acknowledges the false god. Not one!'

The two men holding the crucifixes stepped forward at his gesture. 'Yet I have talked with scholars who have read on this Jesu, and they tell me that a secondary devil cannot lie on these icons. That when it is pressed to the flesh, they cannot help but react.'

The other soldiers were moving now, filing between the first and second ranks on either side of the hall. The crucifix-wielders moved in front of the first person in the line.

'Begin!' Prince Tuan yelled.

The soldiers grabbed the arms of the first woman in the first row, and pulled her head back so that her face showed. The man with the crucifix pressed it against her forehead, the metal figure glinting. The woman - a low-ranking lady of the court - faced them stonily, ignoring the weight pressed on her. Liu wondered if Prince Tuan already knew

which ones would react, or even if the reaction mattered. Xu and herself had dealt with the foreigners many times, conversing and socialising. How would Prince Tuan expect them to react now?

Already she felt soldiers at her shoulders, as they took the arms of the woman beside her. The woman was shaking, trembling like ripples in a pond, and Liu willed her not to respond as the metal was pressed to flesh.

The woman cried out.

She was shoved forward by a blow between her shoulder-blades. As she fell, the soldiers twisted her arms so that she screamed again. She writhed in their grasp, turning her face towards the aristocrat.

'No! Prince Tuan, I beseech you, there is a mistake here! I despise the foreign devils! I have never had contact with them -'

'Yet you cry when faced with their Lord's suffering?'

'I plead with you for my life, my lord.'

'Your Lord is this icon!'

Liu felt her own wrists being grabbed, and tensed briefly. She wanted to twist her forearms free and strike backwards; a short, focussed punch of energy into the bellies of these men. But that would seal her family's fate as well as her own, and she made her head rise up smoothly.

The cast-metal figure on the cross was uneven, its sharp hips pressing down on the thin layers of skin and towards the fragile bone of her forehead. She closed her eyes, so that her vision wasn't filled with the wood. Instead she listened. She let her breath match that of the men who held her, and thought of the energy surging up her spine with each intake. Better that than react to the pain of the Christ pressed into her skull.

As she took another breath, as they released her arms, she heard the sound of a blade swinging in the courtyard. The fleshy impact of it, and the incoherent screams from the woman as the first blow failed to sever the neck. Another swing, and there was the sound of a body falling. Liu kept her eyes closed and focused on her breathing as the woman behind her in the line, the one who had been chanting, fell to the floor screaming. There was the sharp, citric smell of urine, and then scuffling sounds. Liu stayed still and breathed through her mouth.

The ritual was repeated on each person, moving down each line north to south. Prince Tuan watched, fists on his hips, as men and women were dragged down the steps and thrown to their knees in the growing pool of blood. Liu pressed her tongue to the roof of her

mouth and waited.

At last, as the drum high on the hill behind the palace called out the hour, Prince Tuan ordered his men to stop and bowed to the remaining people.

‘We have cleansed the court of many of those who have borne false loyalty, and I thank you for undergoing these trials. I am sure you would endure much greater for the protection of the imperial family from harmful notions and beliefs.

‘You may resume your business about the court.’

At a gesture from the soldiers, the survivors bowed deeply, to indicate their thanks to Prince Tuan for his benevolent actions. The Prince nodded curtly back, and led his men away. Liu straightened and looked across to find her kau fu. He inclined his head briefly, then turned away to talk to one of the eunuchs. The servant nodded quickly, and Liu glimpsed a coin bag exchanging hands. Then Xu approached her whilst the eunuch waited behind.

‘Come, child. We have performed the duty requested of us by the honourable Prince Tuan, and may continue happily to the audience halls to report our own progress to her Imperial Majesty.’

Liu felt the acid bile rise in her throat, threatening to spill out into bitter words. ‘Kau fu Xu! This is -’

‘Not the most precipitous moment to discuss events, ngoi sang.’

His hands, clasped in front of him, indicated the waiting eunuch. Doubtless one loyal to Prince Tuan, and Liu could not afford to be reported as a trouble-maker. Xu nodded politely to several of the higher-ranking people in the hall, then gestured to the eunuch to lead the way.

They were taken to a side-entrance, away from the bloodied courtyard where servants were already bringing wheeled carts to remove the corpses. She and Xu were guided through courtyards and passageways, and often the eunuch took them along the service routes instead of the ornate avenues designed to awe visitors. Clearly, Xu had paid for speed and discretion. The bell that had stopped Prince Tuan had been the eleventh hour, and soon the Dowager Empress would be ending her audiences for the day.

They took a final turn and emerged at the foot of the stairs to the audience hall. The eunuch bowed to Xu, who awarded him with more taels, and they hurried up the marble flight.

Chief Eunuch Li stood at the Empress’s side. He noticed them, and quickly sent Jung Lu over.

‘Most honourable Statesman Xu, we regret that the judicious and

compassionate Dowager Empress is engaged in her last audience of the day.'

Jung Lu swept his arm back to indicate the golden Dragon Throne. Kneeling before it, head bowed, was Commander Meng. He must have paid another eunuch a lot more to have got here so much earlier, Liu thought.

Jung Lu was bringing his hands together and extending them towards Xu . She realised there was an ivory disc within them.

'In recognition of the delicacy of your work, and from her high personal regard, the immortal and wise Dowager Empress would extend this invitation to you. The Empress holds a party on the night of the seventh moon. She would have you attend.'

Xu took the ivory, and Liu glimpsed engraved characters before he slid it up into his sleeve pocket.

'Please conduct to her most illustrious and benevolent Empress my most unworthy thanks for her kind actions.'

They remained silent through the long walk back to the eastern gate of the Zijin Cheng. Outside their bearers idled, sitting on the ground to play dice. Once they were moving, Liu sat loose-limbed as she was carried back to her kau fu's hutong, leaning against the back of the chair. Her body ached with the unused energy she had been forced to hold back. The enforced stillness had turned the energy sour, and it sank heavily into her bones.

At last she saw more familiar, welcoming streets, and heard snatches of birdsong from hidden courtyards. The frantic bustle of the main avenues of the Inner city was replaced by the softer private business of the outer side-streets. The seclusion of her kau fu's house would be most welcome after this heated day. She wondered how soon Shen could draw her a bath to ease her unhappy limbs. As they turned the final corner, a yellow slip of paper danced past, curling and fluttering in some whisper of a breeze. The cart came to a stop by the gateway, and Liu saw the source of the scrap.

The gate to their house was closed, the weathered wood submerged beneath hundreds of paper warnings. They overlapped each other, coiling up as the glue dried out in the afternoon heat. And every one had the same hateful, ugly warning: those who deal with the foreigners will die.

Liang opened the gate just wide enough to let them into the courtyard. Travel chests sat gaping open, half-filled with books and cloth. Ngoi po Xu was sitting at the main table in the hall, directing Shen in the packing. Ngoi po's old fingers were swiftly wrapping

porcelain in straw, then cotton. By her crippled feet sat another chest, half-filled with the precious bundles. She had been collecting fine vases and bowls since before Xu had been born.

'Jai, we should be organising a cart. We must go south, ahead of these northern locusts.'

'It is not safe to travel, mo. There are bandits, and these Righteous Fists running in gangs about the countryside.'

'Then we will use the iron road of the foreigners to reach Tientsin, and take the boat-passage southwards. It is long past the time for me to visit my daughter's family in Guangzhou.'

Xu walked over and dropped to one knee in front of his mother. 'The railway is not safe either. The Boxers are targeting the line to the north, towards Russia, and they will come after the southern line as well.'

'Then what good is the iron road, if it can't be used? You were away before, a young man engaged in great business, but I remember the last time Beijing was ransacked. Looters and rioters everywhere! Your illustrious father ensured that we left the city in time, taking us to safety in the hills. Then he came back and defended this house. In the passing time, you have grown to his age, and he has gone onwards. I must bow to your judgement.'

Xu nodded and rose. He called the servants to him and issued instructions. They were to get the largest jars and fill them with water, and put all flammables in the inner rooms, in case of arson attack. Then check every shutter was secure.

Then there would be nothing to do but wait.

Chapter Six

Liu waited until the house was silent.

The expected attack had not come that first night, and Liang had spent a long morning soaking the threatening papers from the gate. A few determined scraps had refused to be scrubbed away and clung, yellow and illegible, to the wood.

The household had spent another few nights waiting. Shen had taken to sleeping on a mat rolled out in the corridor outside Ngoi po's rooms, in order to be there immediately. Xu had left only for a few hours each day, travelling up to the Huang Cheng to try to gain audience or doing the circuit of tea-houses to find out the latest news. The foreigners in the Legations had, according to rumour, been commanded to leave by the Dowager Empress. Xu did not allow Liu to go out of the house at all. Whenever he was out, Liang - sleepy from nights awake watching for attack - would prop himself up on the spirit-gate and watch Liu's movements through half-closed eyelids.

Despite the uncertain peace of the city, despite the reported attacks on foreign churches and converts, despite the brush they'd had themselves had with the anti-Christian purges, Xu was preparing to attend the Empress' disguise party. The audiences were oversubscribed with matters such as the foreign ships sailing towards the Taku forts that protected Tientsin, the latest pronouncements of the Righteous Harmonious Fists and the courts' vacillating stance on the uprising, so Xu had been unable to present his report on Grieves to the ruler. He hoped the party would enable him to get new instructions from her.

Now, on the fourth night of her restriction to the house, Liu was determined to achieve her own objectives. Her friends had been tracking Grieves' expedition from the day it had passed through Guangzhou. Every child had heard tales of the Great White Pyramid; a mythical lodestone of ancient knowledge, kept secret somewhere in the hills. It contained treasures as great as those of the legendary Chin who had united the Warring States. They had lost the expedition in the deserts, but Liu had only to glimpse the pale jade of the casket to see that the westerners had found something old and beautiful in the wastelands. It had sung of their past, a symbol of the Han. Of how great they had been and how great they would be again, if they could release themselves from the acceptance of fate. If she could possess the casket, free it, then it would become a focus for their movement. An ancient Han symbol should not be hidden by the Manchu or dissected by the westerners. It was *theirs*.

At the low roll of the midnight bell, she slipped from her room. In the corridor, where the moonlit slid through the traceries of the shutters, Shen was asleep. Liu hurried past, staying on the tips of her toes and picking out the silent route along the wooden floor. As she expected, Liang was also asleep. He was seated between the spirit-gate and the street-gate, a pike across his slumbering knees. She would need to be especially silent tonight.

As before, she ran at the wall and kicked herself into the air, trying to ensure that her footfalls were silent and hoping the vibration would not wake Liang. She landed on a different section of the roof this time, avoiding the loose tile she had disturbed before, then ran swiftly along the beam of the roof-ridge and dropped into the silent streets. All the doors were shuttered and barred, and the night watchman could not be heard. She doubted he was still on his rounds. She checked that the commission from the Dowager Empress was still in her tunic pocket, ready to be produced if anyone questioned her, before running towards the great wall of the Inner city.

The main gate had been shut for the night.

She had half-expected it; with parts of the city on fire and mobs running wild, the ingrained response of the Beijing populace was to batten down for the storm. The great walls had defended them in the past, since the time of Kubalai Khan, and it was an instinctive reaction to secure them. She turned eastward and ran along its foundations. The first ten foot of stone was sloping, a gradient designed to hold the bulk of the wall in place, and then it was almost sheer to the crenellations a further twenty feet up. She had scaled such heights in the hills, but the jagged natural cliffsides offered easy footholds.

Liu caught her second wind and sped up her pace. Then, with a flying leap, she kicked onto the lower slope.

She ran diagonally, her feet finding swift purchase on the worn stone. Even when the surface became a sheer face, her momentum propelled her upwards. Here she had to glide more, letting her instinctive skills take over, and she touched on crumbling narrow ledges no wider than a blade's width. She could feel the heavy weight of the ground pulling at her now, as if recognising that she should not be there. This was a moment they trained for, back at Po Chi Lam, to react calmly as the world asserted itself about you. Rather than pause and lose the momentum, she pushed on, forcing her feet to find temporary, imaginary, purchase. Her breath was becoming ragged now, uneven as she began to lose concentration. She was going to fall. With that thought, her feet lost their imagined grip and she flung herself upwards.

One hand found the edge of the wall.

She was hanging by the fingers of her right hand only, but they were holding the higher part of the battlements. Her left quickly reached for the lower part, and she paused for a moment. She was thirty feet in the air, hanging by her fingertips, but she had not fallen. She would not fall. She brought her knees up, folding them into her chest, and tilted her ankles so that the soles of her feet rested on the wall. Her shoulders were starting to hurt now.

She took a centring breath and flung herself outwards. Her arms pulled her up, swiftly grabbing new handholds and dragging her torso across the stone. Then she dropped her head and rolled forward, to land on the wide walkway of the wall.

She lay for a moment, eyes closed and mouth smiling in satisfaction. She had practised such climbs in her training. Her family had thought she'd trained to heal, but she had asked to train to fight. The si gung of Po Chi Lam had been reluctant at first, before agreeing on the condition that she also learn to mend the injuries she might cause. Now, at last, she was proving her skills.

Once she had recaptured her breathing, she rolled to her feet and made her way down to street level. She was to the east of the Legation quarter, in the shops and hotels which normally serviced the Westerners. Everything here was boarded up, and the yellow paper fluttered its warnings and condemnations from every wall. To the west, she saw fire, and the black silhouettes of men. She couldn't tell whether they were fighting the flames or each other. The air stank of smoke, and she could hear the sounds of combat in other streets.

She set off northwards, until she recognised the area where Grieves lived. The stench of burning buildings was stronger here. Turning into a wider avenue, she quickly flattened herself against a wall; cult members were hurling themselves at a barricaded gateway, chanting.

'Kill! Kill! Kill!'

Liu took swift steps backwards before turning to run down a parallel street. Finally she saw the Grieves' gate. It was smashed open, the wood scattered and broken. In the street before it, the remains of furniture and possessions lay discarded like long-forgotten toys. Amongst the remains of the cart lay a clock; its glass face was smoked grey, and the mechanism rattled discordantly as Liu prodded it with her foot. She was too late.

In the courtyard, one of the foreigners was a charred corpse, broken on the steps of the wing where Grieves had died. Liu gagged, but stepped over the remains to push aside the doors to the inner room. The wood was blackened ash silver. Its shiny surface flickered with

reflections of fire. To the side was the collapsed and charred trestle table, where it had been that first morning, but no ancient remains lay there now. Liu quickly checked for signs of the casket. There was nothing. She was too late.

She had better return home before she was missed.

A shadow darted away from the gates as she left. Liu leapt after it. Her legs were tired after the climb, yet still she caught the running figure easily by its tunic. It squirmed, but she twisted her hold until she could look at its face.

'I do not know anything!' it called out, and she realised it was a young boy.

'Everyone knows something. You know your name, don't you?' she asked.

A wary gleam overtook the fear in his eyes. 'I may do.'

'And I'm sure a boy who knows his name also knows the value of coins.' With her free hand, she reached into her tunic and found the smallest coin there.

She held it up, so that the distant flames gleamed on its surface. A trifling amount really, but if the boy was a looter then it would doubtless be enough for him. She caught the greed in his eyes and began threading the coin through her fingers. His eyes followed, then returned to her face.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'Information. Such a little thing, for one as wise as you. The women who lived here; where did they go?'

'The widow, she went to the Legations. The crow-woman came and went after the foreigners were driven out.'

'Crow-woman?' Liu remembered the thin woman in black and red. She brought the coin close so that the boy reached for it, then raised it high above his head.

'What about their objects? All the things that are not here. Did they take them to the Legation, too?'

'No, the soldier took those. Big, broad man.' The boy ceased his squirming for long enough to puff out his chest and illustrate his description. Meng, it must have been.

'Do you know where he took it?'

'Not for that much money.'

'Wise boy.'

Liu gave him the first coin and extracted a second.

‘He took them to the forest of a thousand books,’ the boy said.

Liu released his tunic and let him grab the coin from her hand. He ran off down the street, facing back towards her to check she wasn’t following.

She turned on her heels. The Hanlin Yuan, the forest of a thousand books, was toward the foreign Legations. It was south-west of where she stood, but she had to go south regardless.

Some men ran through the junction ahead of her, and she glimpsed stained blades. The streets were not safe. She gathered her breath and released it in a sigh, letting her muscles relax. Then she scaled the nearest wall.

She made her way along the spines of buildings, the soft soles of her shoes flexing so that she gripped the tiles as she ran. She had done this often in Guangzhou, delighting in the freedom of the roofs and the views they offered of the mundane world. Balancing on the curved tiles had been an escape; it didn’t matter who you were on the tiles, only that you were skilful. Her si gung had reprimanded her for showing off, once. Her family had never known.

Now she had to think as she ran. In some areas the fire was leaping more nimbly than she could. She felt the warmth of smouldering buildings beneath her soles. There were many more levels here than in Guangzhou, needing swift leaps skywards. The alleys and streets she passed were chaotic. The Boxers were northern fighters, with skilled and strong legs, so some were leaping towards the eaves themselves. She caught glimpses of their red-and-black clothing as they hung at the apexes of their jumps.

Realising she was on the last building before the great square that fronted the Hanlin Yuan, Liu paused. She was several storeys above ground level, and let her legs drop to either side of the roof-ridge, sitting to recover her breath. Inside her tunic, the parchment creaked like warm leather.

A figure, clad in red, rose up in front of her.

It was a Red Lantern. The young girl was dressed in crimson, her sleeves trailing down out of sight, her hair free-flowing. In one hand she held a lantern emblazoned with the symbol “fu”, and in the other a fan. Liu fell backwards so that the spine of the roof ridge pressed into her own. She hoped the cultist would not see her there.

The girl frowned, and stepped forward onto the roof. She raised her lantern higher and stared at Liu.

‘Who are you?’

Liu raised her legs and then jack-knifed herself upright, one foot

landing in front of the other on the curved tiles. The Red Lantern ran at her, arms out for balance, and Liu dropped back using one hand to anchor her to the roof as her feet hit her attacker in the stomach. She converted it into a spin, her toes hooked into the girl's tunic. The girl yelled as she was propelled off the roof and fell, flailing like a landed fish, to the courtyard below.

Liu hastened to get away from the building before any other Lanterns looked for their sister. She dropped down a series of roofs, working her way along the edge of the square towards the library until she was only one storey from the ground. After checking below, she converted the final drop into a roll under the eaves and into the shadows. There was a cadre of Red Lanterns rising rapidly towards the building she had been on, like sparks leaping upwards from a fire.

Ahead, by the main gate into the Hanlin Yuan, Meng was directing his men as they carried the plunder into the building. She knew that she would not easily slip past his eyes. She let herself relax, crouching in the shadows.

There was a flurry of shouts within the building and Meng hurried inside, yelling orders. Liu rose, brushed the dust from her clothes, and walked over to the gate. A solider stepped forward.

'Let me through,' she commanded, in Mandarin.

'I regret that no-one may enter without Commander Meng's permission.'

Liu withdrew the parchment and held it, still rolled, towards the soldier. 'I was with Meng when he visited the foreign thieves. I am part of this commission.'

As she had hoped, the soldier regarded the written order with suspicion. She doubted he could read it. He gestured for her to step closer to the nearest light and looked at her face. Then he bowed and let her through, satisfied that she was the same Han woman they had been forced to defend previously.

Inside, she hurried to the courtyard, to gain her bearings. Huge red pillars, as thick as forest pines, supported the upper levels. Before her lay long, wide reflecting-pools, their moon-gleaming surfaces shadowed with lily-leaves and the faint ripples made by carp. Well-trimmed trees rose on slender silver trunks, their leaves pale and drooping in the heat of the summer. The wooden shutters, closed all about the upper levels of the building, were of dark and ancient wood. The Hanlin Yuan held the finest works of the great scholars, words spanning millennia; the shutters were cut with fine fretwork, glazed with oiled paper, to let the air and ideas circulate rather than grow mouldy in the damp northern winters. The higher levels were dark, so

Liu knew Meng was on the first floor.

She took the stairs up in the south-western corner first, emerging onto the landing of the south side. Passageways led down either side of the rooms, lined with narrow benches, following the inner and outer walls of the building. The inner walls had sliding doors to allow access to the rooms. Liu took the outer corridor first, peering through slats and into the library's chambers. The walls were lined with shelving, rack upon rack of scrolls, with hundreds of red silk tassels hanging down like vermilion waterfalls. In some, scrolls lay unrolled, as if some unseen scholar still worked over them. Meng must have ordered them out without warning, since no learned man would leave the history sprawling across the tables so carelessly.

Finally, in the eastern wing, she saw the pale green of jade.

In the drowsy amber of the guarded lanterns, the precious stone casket glowed, as if the room's light didn't touch it. It was clasped to the chest of the desiccated body from the tomb, lying on a silken cloth over a broad table. Liu slid open the door to the room, and slipped in silently, leaving the door open behind her. Approaching, she could not resist the urge to bow to the ancient corpse, honouring its tenacious grip on its precious treasure.

Gently, she lifted away one bony, shrivelled hand and touched the pale stone.

It tingled, like frost-bitten fingers, and she saw *silent green forests and dusty red plains. A glint of red hair and then dark, dark eyes. Fire crackles and dances. A woman laughs, bitter and defeated, and she* pulled her hand away with a gasp.

'It is a most curious object, is it not, Liu Hui Ying?' Commander Meng asked her.

Chapter Seven

The man was standing in the doorway, one hand idly resting on the hilt of his sword. His proud brows and mouth were rough brush-strokes of darkness in the shaded light.

'I thought it belonged to her most imperial majesty,' Liu said, 'yet here it rests with lowly Han scholars' words.'

Meng smiled, and she knew then that he intended to turn the chaos in the streets to his own personal gain. He smiled like a tiger thinking it had cornered a fox, like the traders who thought they had cheated her father or the hateful men who had beaten down the Spring. This was not the brief summer storm of Prince Tuan but the long northern winter, cold, bitter and unrelenting.

'We are in dangerous times, Liu Hui Ying. The most venerable Dowager Empress has many vital matters of the people to attend to, and I do not wish to burden her further with these trifling matters. When the war is over, she will greet the return of her most sacred ancestors to the Zijin Cheng with all honour.'

'And she will lavish praise and rewards on the servants who bring them to her?'

'Of course. Once the foreign devils are driven out, then we can rejoice in the restoration of the Dragon Throne's most ancient past.'

'This is Han, Commander Meng.'

'The Han cling to false springs, their fortunes changing with the seasons. We are the ever-lasting Qing.'

Liu instinctively stepped back as Meng strode into the room. The crackle of fire, which she had thought was part of the casket's strange inducement, had grown louder; now she realised the fire was somewhere below.

'Hasn't the earth dried up?' she asked. 'Don't the people starve in the countryside? Is it not a sign that the dynasty is no longer in harmony with the land, Commander Meng?'

He smirked at her, but she caught his quick glance towards the shutters beyond her. The room was growing lighter, and there was a steady roar now, like a waterfall in the next valley. She could feel the heat at her back, tendrils of cool air whipping past her.

Meng's eyes returned to hers. He watched for the first indication of her move, just as she watched for his.

'Your Han knowledge burns, Liu. Soon you will all be ashes to be

swept away.'

They lunged for the casket simultaneously. His heavy steps made the floor thunder, and his hands ripped the casket away from the corpse before she could reach it. She leapt at him, her nails catching at his cheek. Clasping the casket in one hand, he backhanded her with the other. Her block was too slow; she saw it, but her muscles refused to react. She lifted clean off the floor and smashed into an embroidered wall hanging. It tore free under the impact, and she tumbled clumsily, half-wrapped in silk.

She saw Meng turning away towards the inner door, without another glance towards her. It took her long, frustrating moments to free herself from the material. Even as she crawled clear of the silk, she heard boots in the inner corridor and the sound of benches being dragged against the door.

She climbed to her feet and tried the outer corridor. Looking through the half-open door, she saw golden flames spitting angry red sparks. The glowing embers fluttered upwards, into the dark ceilings, where they embedded themselves and glowed like distant stars. The air raced past her, drawn towards the devouring fire below. There was no way she could use the outer corridors to escape.

Liu turned back into the room. It was muzzy, the light breaking down into dancing particles that stung her vision. She would have to gain herself enough time to open the inner doors. She ran back to the fallen hanging and ripped at it; the ancient thread was strong, the weave unwilling. She pulled an edge to her teeth and pulled at it until she broke the strands, the silk bitter in her mouth. She tore a thick band of the material free and ran back to the outer door. Rolling the fabric, she jammed it against the door's base. There was no water she could use to dampen it.

She dropped to her knees and crawled to the inner door. As she had suspected, Meng and his soldiers had jammed the benches so that the sliding door rattled in its grooves but didn't open. She would have to kick her way through.

Liu spun onto her back as close to the door as she dared, bringing her knees up tight to her chest. She dropped her arms to the now-hot floor to anchor herself, and let fly a strong kick, feet and knees tight together. The wood rattled but did not break.

The fire was drowning her, until she could hear nothing but its roar. Her limbs felt slow and heavy in the thick air. She could smell millions of parchments as they burned, the silk bindings shrivelling into tiny, floating fragments. She had to focus; think only of the point of the door she wanted to bend to her will. She kick-punched again,

and was satisfied to feel the ancient rosewood splinter a little.

She could see nothing but dirty smoke above her, and tilting her head back she realised that the fire was pouring through the slits in the shutters. She raised her knees to her chest, screaming with the effort, ready to snap a final kick.

Something white caught in her bleary eyes. To her left, half-hidden beneath the discarded silk, the desiccated body was being caressed by flames. Even as it was consumed, it seemed to fill out; the muscles reforming over the skeleton, then pure silver-white skin encasing it. For a moment she imagined she saw the ghostly face of the casket's guardian, beautiful and fearful in its anger at the theft.

She snapped her knees straight, punching a kick through the door.

The corridor was on fire.

Varnish crackled and peeled, breathing acid fumes into the choking air. Flames ran along every surface, seeking to reach higher and higher until they met the stars. Liu brought a sleeve up to block the smoke from her nose and throat. The fumes stung her eyes, blinding her with heavy tears. Taking a breath, the silk damp with sweat against her lips, she ran towards the nearest stairs. She tried to hit the centre of the floorboards, dancing quickly on before the flames could catch at her thin soles.

The fire was hungry. It reached for her from all angles, leaping towards her hair and tugging at her clothing so that she stumbled over smoke. Each breath caught in her throat like swallowing thorns. Her vision narrowed, focusing only on the tunnel of least danger, seeking the wavering darkness instead of the harsh, bright flames. The floor growled, and she felt it shift beneath her as the fire began to pull it into its burning centre. She dragged in an unwilling breath as she scrambled onto the staircase. The scorching air burned through her throat and down into her chest, where it sat like sour spirits.

The stairs had yet to catch. She tried to get to her feet, but the burning air had her about the throat now, choking her. She kept trying to draw another breath, her instinctive need for it overriding her conscious awareness that the air here was deadly. Each intake brought nothing but a darker pain on her throat. Her lungs began to burn, hard and painful in her chest.

A surprisingly still voice in her head told her that she was dying, crumpled on her knees in a burning monument to her people's knowledge. Undignified, unwitnessed and having failed in her mission. She was amazed at her calm mortification.

No. She would not die this way. This invisible death, catching at her

so that she became nothing. She wanted to die fighting; if not the Qing, then at least her own fate. Still unable to draw a rasping breath, she crawled forward, and felt the edge of a stair beneath her clumsy, cramping fingers. Pushing forward, she let her hunched, dead weight drag her over. The stairs hit her, pummelling blows on her protecting limbs as she fell.

There were arms holding her. Liu could feel corded muscles beneath her knees and about her back. Hard, callous fingers gripped her upper arms and drew her against a firm, unyielding chest. Every touch pressed her ruined silk clothes to her burning skin, as if thousands of tiny needles were brushing along her nerves. She was cradled against someone, and he was walking. Each jolting step made her skin scream. Even the night air was sharp against her.

Then she was flung to the ground.

She rolled over onto her knees, and felt her innards heave. The first choking splutter of vomit was ashen. Thick grey droplets splashing into the dust of the ground before her. She drew a ragged, whooping breath and choked again. She put her palms flat beside her head as she continued to throw up the remains of the library, until her eyes cried at the pain of it.

The first clear breath stank of bile and burnt as cold as ice into her breastbone. She coughed at the shock, then took several slow, shallow breaths to stop the coughing fit. Once she was just hiccuping, she sat back on her heels and pressed at her streaming eyes with the back of her hands. Every blink hurt, as ash was dragged across her eyeballs.

Close to her side were two pairs of feet. They were male, dressed in the bindings and shoes of fighters. Looking up, Liu saw loose trousers above the knee, then belted leather tunics and wrist-guards. The leather was old, dusty as tombs and scarred by many battles. The men's faces were broad, but fine-featured. The eyes were as stone, though; hard and unyielding. Each man wore a headband of red silk, and on each headband Liu glimpsed the character "feng" - the phoenix - before the two men turned away.

She was in a gutter outside the Inner Cheng. Grit from the smoke mingled with the ever-black sand of the deserts, and formed sombre clouds that hid the sky completely. They glowed with the blood-red light of the fire.

Why had the soldiers pulled her from her death? Why save her from that ignoble death, only to throw her into the gutter? Their uniforms were old. They were not the sort of leather tunics worn by imperial men. The soldiers had been silent, offering no clue but the "feng" on

their headbands. She could not even recall them breathing heavily as they'd carried her. Yet they had discarded her.

It made no sense. But for now, all Liu wanted was to get back to her kau fu's house before he rose for the day, and collapse onto her bed. And to drink some water.

Reaching the outer wall of Xu's house, Liu hauled herself up slowly onto the eaves. She winced as her stiffening muscles refused to obey her fully, as if the flesh had been replaced with damp, hard wood. Her feet were uneasy on the tiles now, too tired to grip properly. The sun was just starting to burn through the smoke, a white disk of light rising behind the red clouds. She dropped and slid down the tiles, one leg extended and the other bent, like a toppled crane. At the edge, she let herself fall, her knees reflexively rolling her as the ground hit her feet and made her repress an exhausted groan of pain.

As she gathered the energy in her legs, forcing herself back onto her feet to get to her room, she registered the presence of her kau fu before her eyes even recognised him.

Chapter Eight

Xu stood on the courtyard side of the spirit-gate. He was in the centre of it, his feet broadly planted and his arms folded. Liang stood behind his shoulder.

'Kau fu -'

'No! Liu Hui Ying, I am to speak first.'

He pointed at the ground, and Liu nodded acceptance. She sank to her knees with relief, sagging back onto her heels, her spine curling.

'Straight, girl!'

Her spine snapped upright at his instruction, her head levelling and her eyes opening. He nodded when he saw he had her attention. Liu could hear the tap of ngoi po's feet as she emerged from her own rooms, and focused on each rapped step as if it were a bullet. She could feel her own body swaying as precariously as ngoi po's, but without Shen to balance her.

'This, then, is how you repay your family for protecting you? My sister's husband indulged you too long for having her eyes. Had you been my wife's child, I would have set your bones more traditionally. You would have a good husband now and, the gods willing, children. You are like a late-ripening apple, eaten into by foreign words before you can be taken from the branch. Keep your head up, girl.

'We protect you, and this is what you do?'

'Kau fu -'

'What was it you had to do outside these walls tonight, hmmm? What was so important that you had to sneak out like a common thief? Speak.'

'Kau fu, I went back to the Grieves' house, to try to get back the casket. It should not have been left in foreigners' hands when the Boxers are destroying anything alien. But I was too late. Meng -'

'Commander Meng,' Xu chided.

'Commander Meng had already been there. The casket was taken by him.'

'Then you should have trusted to your elders, not taken action without permission. There are dangerous men in the city and you threaten to bring them to us. You read the warnings pasted here: stop all involvement with the foreigners, or die. Yet you go back there. We cannot shelter you, unless you accept your due punishment.'

A warming anger began in Liu's belly as Xu continued his

chastisement. This family spoke one philosophy and lived another. They let her feet grow free, but wanted to bind her mind, to contort and set her thoughts. They sent her to school, made use of her foreign languages, but didn't want her to think foreign thoughts. For two years she had been dutiful and filial. She had served as she should and screened herself from their disapproval. The anger spread throughout her body now, massaging the worn muscles into life.

Liu stood slowly, deliberately. She realised, as she kept her head straight instead of tilting it down in deference, that she was as tall as Xu. He was scowling at her, his hand gesturing to his servant to bring the bamboo switch.

'Xu, I will not. You need not send Liang for the bamboo. I will leave this house.'

She bowed to him from the waist, clasping her right fist in her left palm in the fighter's salute. Then she turned on her heel and offered a low bow - palms together - to the stiff figure of ngoi po, who ignored her.

She walked past Xu, around the spirit-gate. She pushed the bar up, expecting at any moment to feel Liang's hand on her shoulder. Then the gate swung free, and she stepped out over the threshold.

The sun had fully cleared the rooftops now, but was still moon-pale behind the dark clouds. She walked slowly back to the city gates, her muscles heavier than iron now that she had used up the burst of anger. But now she was walking she was unable to stop.

Others were wandering the streets as well. Families gathered about over-laden carts like chickens by a feeding-bowl, flustered and squawking and squabbling, as they headed south down the widest roads. Others sat, perched on their meagre possessions or crouching with nothing. Some had tied silk about their heads to improve their breathing, others had tear-tracks in the ash on their faces.

Within the walls of the Inner Cheng, she found herself walking towards the night city where she had found her cousin. The city smelt of stale wine and dead opium fumes, lingering long after they had been exhaled. Still-lit lanterns flickered and swayed, glowing pointlessly. The air was a little clearer here, the prevailing desert wind carrying the burning fires' smoke away to the east.

The House of the Pleasure of the Bitten Peach was shuttered. Liu banged the heel of her palm against those shutters a few times, rattling their fastenings, but she knew it was hopeless. The night people would sleep till the sun was high, used to ignoring the morning. She had no idea where else to go. Xu An Nuo would have

sent a message to her friends, warning them that Meng was in Beijing. They would have relocated by now, cautious of the officer's presence. An Nuo might know where they were, but Liu had nowhere else to look for him. She had no place in the mundane world. She turned and let her sore back hit the shutters, then slid down them into a cross-legged seat on the ground. She closed her eyes briefly.

'Hey, wake up, girl! Up! Up! Can't sleep here without a tael to the house.'

Liu realised she had dozed, letting the worn wood of the shutters take her weight. Her legs felt stiff as she straightened, and her face was tight with dryness. She recognised the tiny woman who had sat on the veranda watching the comings and goings. She was dressed in simple old clothes now, her hair bound back under a cloth.

'Please, I am looking for Xu An Nuo.'

'Who are you?'

'I am his biu go. Liu Hui Ying. I was here a few nights ago.'

The madam looked her up and down, then sniffed.

'Xu An Nuo's cousin was a pretty snooty girl. Finely-dressed. You have been sleeping in ditches as well as on whorehouse steps?'

'Please? I would be most grateful if you could tell me how to find my biu go.'

'How grateful?'

Liu felt in her tunic pocket and found a couple of coins. Enough to buy a bottle of wine perhaps, and plenty to buy street kids, but not much for this woman.

'This. It is all I have. Please, Xu has disowned me as he has his son.'

The woman snorted. She took the coins and stepped aside. Gesturing at the stairs to the upper levels, she shooed Liu up. 'Second on the left. He has a rough head in the mornings.'

Liu used her palm to knock on the door the woman had indicated. Inside a man groaned, and then she recognised her cousin's voice.

'Jin Ning Mu! I paid for all night. Let me rest!'

'Xu An Nuo? It's Liu Hui Ying.'

There was cursing from within, and the thump of someone landing ungraciously on the floor. An Nuo opened the door, still tying his tunic in place. Liu caught a glimpse of a bed, a half-dressed figure still slumbering in it, before her cousin blocked her view.

'Hui Ying! This is…' He paused, taking in her slumped posture and

worn features. ‘Mei mei. You’re covered in ashes. Has something happened at my father’s house?’

‘Apart from my leaving before I was thrown out? No, biu go Xu.’

‘But they are safe?’

At her nod, he smiled briefly. ‘Wait here.’

He shut the door to the room, and she heard a brief murmured conversation. Then he re-emerged and guided Liu back down the stairs. He sat her at one of the tables and took her chin in his fingers.

‘You have been in the fighting, haven’t you? Who caused this ugly bruise on my fair little Hui Ying? Jin Ning Mu!’

The woman who had opened the shutters came out from the back rooms, a broom in one hand.

‘Jin Ning Mu. Please would you bring a bowl of water and a cloth?’

Once the woman brought them, scowling at Liu and taking Xu An Huo’s coin, he set about cleaning Liu’s face.

‘Once, one long southern summer,’ he said, as he wiped the damp cloth under her tired eyes, ‘there were two young cousins playing in their grandfather’s orchard. One little boy, one littler girl. They would come in; one spotless and the other covered with dirt. The little boy would be scolded by his mother for not playing with other boys. The littler girl would be scolded for her dirty face. After a few days, the little boy started to look after his troublesome littler cousin. He learnt to get a damp cloth and wipe away the dirt, to save her from her scolding.

‘There. All done, littler cousin.’

Liu still ached. Her mouth still rankled with the sour taste of her vomit. Her muscles still protested every move. Yet she felt calmer now, as if a place had been regained.

Jin Ning Mu brought over some tea things, setting the kettle over the burner and unstacking two old cups. She brushed aside Xu An Huo’s fumble for money.

‘The city is on fire. Soon Beijing will be under siege by the foreigners, as the devils already are in their churches. This morning, I can make one generous gesture. So, have tea.’

They brewed the green tea and drank in silence. Liu let it trickle down her throat, wincing as the hot liquid slid over the hoarse membranes. She felt it suffuse her body from her belly, warming and relaxing.

‘An Huo, I must thank you for this kindness but I need to find my friends. They will not be at their old house now, not after the news

that Meng is here.'

An Huo put his cup down and replaced its lid.

'I used to protect you from the scoldings, Hui Ying. I would love to keep you safe now, make you stay here until the city has burned itself out. But just as my mei mei would insist on playing in the dirt, so I know that if I did then you would just go anyway. All the protection I can provide is to tell you that they are in the fifth house west on Liushu Hutong.'

Xu An Huo picked up the damp cloth and gave her nose a final swipe. 'Take care, Lui Hui Ying. You are my only kin.'

He picked up his tea and walked slowly back towards the stairs. At their foot, he turned and bowed to her.

More people were on the streets now, many fleeing by any free road. Somewhere near the French Cathedral, which could be located by the crash of gunfire against it, the crowds were so thick that Liu paused to consider which side-street to try. As she looked northwards, towards a busy lane that might have been worth taking, she glimpsed a figure dressed in luminescent, trailing white. Liu's heart jolted with familiarity, despite being sure she had never seen the woman before. There had been something in her stance, something unreal in the way she'd been gliding through the crowd.

For a moment, Liu was back in the Hanlin Yuan with the ghost of the mummy rising above her. Then the figure was gone.

Before long, Liu had made her way to the right part of the city. The large buildings that flanked the edges of the Zijin Cheng and the mercantile streets were becoming outnumbered by narrow lanes. She could taste incense and morning dumplings, and hear quiet domesticity behind the closed doors and gates. Liushu Hutong was a quiet street, just a few people standing about on corners. The fifth door was as anonymous as all the others; made of old, worn wood and with a wide iron ring. She knocked on the wood of the gate, ignoring the iron.

'Who is it?' someone asked from within, high and querulous.

'Liu Hui Ying. From Guangzhou.'

There was a pause, long enough for her to rest her forehead against the grainy wood and close her eyes briefly. She just wanted to rest. She felt the vibration of the bar being swung aside, and the gate opened just wide enough for her to enter. She slid in and walked around the plain wooden screen into the courtyard.

The house was two storeys high, its curling eaves decorated with luck-charms and bells. The yard itself was bare, with no trees to throw

shade on it. To her left and right, racks stood lined with quarter-staffs, pikes and a few sabres. In the centre, handfuls of men and women were sparring. The only sound was the scuffle of their feet on the flagstones, and the occasional muted grunt at a strike. The bells above sang louder, catching every breeze.

'Liu Hui Ying!'

She recognised Kwok Wing Jo and Peng Tan Hao as they broke off their practise to greet her. She bowed. Then she fell to her knees on the flagstones, and closed her exhausted eyes.

Chapter Nine

Liu woke slowly, her body wanting to stay unmoving a while longer. She was in a narrow bed, beneath gentle covers. Opening her eyes, lying still on her front with her head tilted, she saw she was in a wide, simply-decorated room. Afternoon light, reflected from some other surface, caught slow-moving dust and made the pale ceiling glow. The sound of bells, close by the open window, overlaid the scuff of feet in the courtyard and the clatter of dishes below.

She had faint memories of being guided here, her skin prickling with clammy heat, of being made to drink cool water and then lie down on cool sheets. Now she stretched beneath the covers, lengthening her legs and circling her shoulders. Her breath caught when her calves and toes cramped, and she twisted to tap her fingers against pressure-points and release the painful locks. Her biceps hurt as well, and her face was taut across her right cheekbone. She knew there was no point closing her eyes and hoping she could sleep through the healing; the best cure was physical exercise, reminding the muscles of their function.

Rising, she found a clean set of clothes on the stool at the end of her own bed. Pink-grey silk trousers and tunic, with simple ribbons of red, black and silver for decoration. Her own purple street shoes were beneath, worn and dirty with pale ash. There was a bowl of water and a washcloth against the inner wall. She cleaned herself quickly and dressed.

The door led to a vaguely familiar corridor, then a staircase. Domestic sounds floated upwards, the ring of metal on a cast-iron stand, the swish of hot water and the singing note of porcelain bowls. There were people talking too, voices rising and falling in animated discussion. As she descended, the stairs creaked and the voices paused.

Liu walked into the main hall, not sure how many of the people she would know. Two tables were being set for food with massive communal bowls of rice and platters of vegetables. The flagged floor radiated coolness, soothing her still-aching feet even through the soles of her shoes.

She spotted Peng first. He was the opposite of his partner Kwok. The two fought with different styles and skills, but Liu had first met them when they were beating back an opium gang in Guangzhou docks together. The fight had tumbled into the yard of her father's factory as she'd crossed it, and she'd shrunk back against a stack of crates. The

two students had held off half a dozen gang members until the seniors of Po Chi Lam had arrived. Then her father, emerging from the factory, had introduced her to Wong Fei Hung and his organisation. That had been six years ago, before she had begun to train herself.

Peng was tall and broad, with a pockmarked and pale northern face. His queue was wrapped about his head like a band, so that the plaited hair absorbed the sweat of his brow. He had ink-stained fingers, and a crease in his nose from where his glasses pinched as he read. Next to Peng, Kwowk was slight with a smooth moon-face and light, restless eyes. His mouth was always curling into a smile. He had his queue slung about his neck, ready to protect his thin, fragile collarbones should he get into a sword-fight.

As students, Peng and Kwok were as interested in long discussions on the reform of the country as in learning to fight. Peng seemed to get copies of every liberal pamphlet, and half the reactionary ones, and would discuss the ideas in them at length. He used to bring foreign magazines into Po Chi Lam and ask Liu, by then working as an interpreter for her father, to translate them. Whilst Peng read and talked, Kwok silently acted. He did small things, gestures which spoke as eloquently for reform as Peng's words. If a mother came with a girl child whose freshly-set feet were causing agony, Kwok would set about gently unbinding them, resetting crushed bones and soothing the screams. He organised societies in the docks, getting the workmen to support each other against the more corrupt owners.

Peng greeted her first. 'Liu Hui Ying! Si mei, are you recovered?'

'Si bo Peng,' she said. 'It is good to see you and bo Kwok here. The Po Chi Lam and the reform are my nearest family now.'

'Then you will be pleased to see who else is here.'

Peng directed her gaze to the courtyard, visible through the open doorway. A lone man was working through the form, his back to the main hall. His queue hung as far as his bending knees, swinging in counter-rhythm to his movements. As he executed a diagonal flight, turning about so that he faced the main hall, she recognised the gleaming broad head and narrow chin. His unfocussed eyes held shadows, and a frown was still smoothing itself out on his brow.

'Si fu Gai!'

The man gave no sign of hearing her exclamation, absorbed in his practise. Gai was one of si gung Wong's most trusted students, one of his three lieutenants. After the death of his eldest son in a gang brawl, Wong Fei Hung had retreated from teaching his fighting style to concentrate on the healing side of Po Chi Lam, and his three most senior disciples had taken over the martial teaching. Gai was the

favourite amongst the more sombre students, the ones who - like Liu, Peng and Kwok - were interested in the reforms proposed by Sun Yet sen and Huang Hsing. Gai was the quietest; more thoughtful and restrained in style than the others. Where they were dramatic fighters, with flair and energy, Gai advocated the use of minimum force for maximum effect. He spoke of the head as the most valuable weapon.

He was holding a slight frown of concentration as he finished his practise with a bow towards the main hall. He straightened, opened his eyes, and smiled at Liu.

'Si mei.'

'Si fu,' she bowed quickly, repressing a wince as her sides pulled. 'I am glad that you have made it safely to Beijing. I had heard that the journey from Guangzhou was becoming too dangerous.'

'It is, Liu. Banditry increases and the Righteous Harmonious Fists, or those who copy them, are making progress southwards. Si gung Wong was most concerned, however, that I come north.'

'I have much to report -'

'First, si mei, let us eat. We can discuss matters with more focus if we are not distracted by hunger.'

Despite the use of familial titles, Gai immediately dismissed rank privileges and expected all his juniors to eat at the same time. Liu was still feeling too worn to grab the best pieces; her hunger seemed to have burnt up with the Hanlin Yuan. She knew Gai was watching her lack of appetite. He often instructed them to balance their internal harmony as well as the physical form. Once the dishes were being cleared, and the leftover food was being parcelled into wicker baskets, he gestured for his most favoured students to join him about a kettle of tea. They sat in silence as the lanterns were lit and raised to glow in the dusk.

Gai put out a hand and tilted Liu's head, angling her right cheek towards the light. His fingers ran gently down, pressing against the flesh. It was not a caress but an assessment. He seemed satisfied when she winced away from his touch.

'You have been injured.'

'Commander Meng has a swift hand. Hard, too.'

'You should not be fighting him. You are not ready for combat; your instincts are not relaxed enough for the unpredictability of real fights.'

Liu bowed her head as if in obedience, but she could feel the angry blood pounding through the bruised cheek. Even as she kept her annoyance hidden, she knew Gai was right; her very reaction to his criticism illustrated his point.

‘You had best tell from the start,’ Gai prompted.

Liu described the previous two weeks: her visits to the Zijin Cheng and the Grieves’, her confrontations with Meng and the burning of the Hanlin Yuan. She paused as she recounted the fire, deciding to omit the apparition of the mummy and its subsequent reappearance in the streets. She felt foolish enough for her failures without adding a ghost story to the tale. Gai was drawn by the description of the men who had pulled her free of the burning library.

‘The symbol of the phoenix? I cannot think of any society or gang which uses it.’

Kwok’s finger tapped at the table a couple of times, a gesture which - as Liu had learnt - meant he had something to say.

‘The Dowager Empress uses the phoenix.’

Liu shook her head. ‘These were not imperial troops. They were too coarsely-dressed. The Empress’ soldiers are finely-arrayed, in silks and rich leather. These were old, heavy tunics, worn as if they had slowed many blades.’

Gai paused to sip his tea, then rested his elbows on the table and sighed. ‘Si gung Wong has given me instructions. Messages to pass on from the south. The Dowager Empress has called for the southern governors to send men, arms and money in support of this war against the foreigners. Some of the officials are… *cautious* about her choice of path. One is sending men, but slowly. Another delays despatching his own. All are reluctant to give up taxes to engage in a war with the very countries whose trade makes the south prosper. The British Navy in the Fragrant Harbour alone out-numbers the entire fleet of the Empire. The Americans are experienced campaigners, with many thousands of troops in the Philippines. The Japanese and Russians long to partition more of our land.

‘I am bringing these messages of caution to the liberal forces here in Beijing, to encourage them in their advice to the Dowager Empress. But an executioner’s blade hangs over every communication. We have not forgotten Yuan’s betrayal of the Hundred-Day Spring. These phoenix fighters; do we seek them out, or avoid them?’

‘We do not know if we can even find them again.’

‘You saw them at the Hanlin Yuan. That suggests they are interested in similar things to yourself.’

‘The casket? The only people in the Hanlin that night were ones seeking the objects Grieves had stolen. Si fu, I want to regain the casket. And it may draw these fighters out.’

Gai shook his head. ‘It may also bring Meng and his tigers to our

gate. Si mui Liu, you must devote your time to our si gong's instructions. It is more important to reduce the violence towards the foreigners, and to aid and protect people from attack.'

'The casket is a most precious symbol, si fu -'

'Enough, si mei!' Gai's flat palm smacked the table. Not hard, but loud. The teacups sang discordant notes and the students jumped with them. 'Si mei, the task you were asked to perform is becoming a personal quest for you. You must realise that if you had any of those objects now, then you would be jeopardising the greater cause and endangering us all? Meng is ruthless; we cannot afford a confrontation with him and *attempt* to calm the gangs.'

Liu bowed her head briefly. She tried to calm the rage burning her cheeks. She held her hands tightly-folded within the sleeves of her tunic, but the energy pulsing along her nerves wished to be released.

'But si fu Gai -'

'No. Sleep tonight. Then you can choose your fate.'

Gai took her wrist gently, pressing his thumb lightly into the point between her own thumb and first finger.

'Stay, si mei.'

Her anger diffused, even as she knew that he had pressed the point with this purpose, and that she would at least stay for the night. Perhaps Gai was right.

The shutters were open, letting in the humid night air. Liu knew she was dreaming.

Her sleep had been reluctant in drawing her down, despite the exhaustion of her body. She had lain, thinking through the events of the previous night and how she might have changed them. She had been woken from her half-reverie several times; noises outside startling her so that she listened for more, or a sudden falling jolt making every muscle leap.

In her dream - and she knows it is a dream - she is back in the Hanlin Yuan. The shelves and tables are bare, the wood unvarnished. She is in the wrong room. She glides through the chambers, moving effortlessly through a series of interconnected doors which are opening before her. Each successive room is empty, with no history or words lining them. She catches a glimpse of the jade casket at last, at the end of many more chambers. It tugs at her, her heart hurting with the wish to have it again. She looks down to see a silk thread, fine and taut, piercing her chest and running to the casket. She follows and the thread is coiling about her, but the casket remains as far from her reach as before. The thread is binding her like the

cocoons in the silk factories.

She is in a courtyard, under a midnight sky. The paving is so wide that the distant buildings are as small as children's toys on the edges. The slabs are laid in a pattern, tracing long, sinuous paths towards the centre. There is a pagoda at the heart, a hundred storeys high. It is made of the finest jade, pale and translucent in the stars' light. The patterns carved into it are those from the casket. It is the casket. She knows she must follow the path to reach it. The threads disintegrate and she takes a step forward. The courtyard fills.

There are trees and gardens, waterfalls and reflecting-pools. Lights are strung out, blotting out the ancient stars, and somewhere musicians are playing. The people in the courtyard are disguised. They are in costumes and masks, except the masks are real. A gaggle of schoolgirls are in military dress, giggling and throwing each other salutes. Chief Eunuch Li is dressed as the Emperor. The Goddess Kuan Yin is dressed as the Dowager Empress. A crow is hopping through the crowds, pecking at ankles. The Emperor, except that she recognises him as the last Emperor, is dressed as a concubine and dancing with An Nuo. She wants to warn her cousin, but the path makes her keep walking.

She can see the doorway of the pagoda. There is a clear area before it, as if none of the party will go into its shadows. She has reached the end of the path and must step into open space. Behind her a bird caws. Liu steps into the green-hued shadows.

They darken, and she looks up to see that a great dragon is coiling in the air above her. The dragon is old and powerful. Its warm, dry skin ripples with muscles. Liu takes a flying leap, diving into the air as if kicking off from the bottom of Guangzhou bay. The air is heavy like water and she scissors her legs to rise higher. Her hair, long as it had been once, trails like black silk and the pagoda approaches through the liquid air. It hums and she realises it is lit from within.

The claws of the dragon rip through her right leg-muscles, tearing through flesh and sinew. She tumbles, and the dark scales of the dragon fill her vision. She crashes into the dust. The crow caws again.

They are in the deserts. Red and black sand, mixed with grey ash, grinds painfully into the torn leg and fills her mouth. Liu pushes herself up on her hands, her back arching.

The pagoda is still before her, pale as bone in the sun. As she turns to it, the dragon's front claw gouges at her face. She feels the blood run from the five cuts. Angry now, her right cheek burning, she throws herself forward. Her body is uncoiling, twisting and ripping at the old dragon with her own four talons. She soars upwards.

A swirl of shimmer, red and fiery, erupts in front of her. She tries to

defend herself, but these new limbs don't understand her movements and she falls from the air.

Liu woke.

She was lying on her bruised right cheek so that it burnt with pain, and she lay still for long moments, one leg cramping. Her body felt sluggish, weighed down by the earth. Below there were the sleepy-voiced complaints of the people starting the morning meal and the toll of the drum, somewhere nearby, calling the hour.

She redressed in the pink-grey silk, folding her own suit into a bundle. She descended the stairs silently, stepping over the nightingale boards. Gai was waiting for her at the gate. Liu started, then bowed deeply. She held it so that she could regain her composure. He would not talk her around, nor soften her desire to take the casket with a well-aimed touch. Not this time. Why else had she dreamed of it, unless she was supposed to take it?

'I am sorry, si fu, but…'

Gai bowed back. 'Liu Hui Ying. I would not have you leave us badly. You are still a member of this house, even if you must follow your own path through the chaos.'

'Thank you.'

He stood aside and watched as she raised the heavy bar across the gate. As the gate closed at her back, she knew she could expect no more help there.

Chapter Ten

To have no family, no connections, was a strange sensation to Liu. She was used to having a place in a structure, to having a senior instructing her. To answer to no-one but herself was disquieting. What did she have? Some shoes of silver, a few uncut Cantonese dollars and smaller coins, her old clothes bundled on her back.

Her access to the court was through Xu. She did not fool herself into entertaining the idea that she might be granted access to the imperial courts without him. Even if she were, she would never be left alone to search for a small casket in the hundreds of rooms within. Xu had been proud of his minor status within the court; even with the neighbours scurrying along walls like bugs, he had talked of the invitation to the entertainment. He had revelled in the face it brought him and had positioned the carved ivory invitation in front of the ancestral shrine within the house, so that his father, jou fu Xu, looked favourably down from a painting on the proud achievements of his son.

She could recall its details. The invite was a circle, with one raised and one indented carving of a fish; the guards at the Zijin Cheng would have a matching half to fit it. It was a fine piece, but a standard, since it bore no name. The edges were a little worn, faintly discoloured, as if it had passed through many nervous hands before. The guards would not be looking for Xu's face, but his invitation.

She walked back to her old home, through the brittle morning hush. This time she scaled the outer wall with ease, and lay flat to peer over the tiles to the inner courtyard below. Xu was there. He stood lightly, his knees a little bent and his arms moving gracefully. Liu had hoped to arrive before he began his morning practise. Watching, she saw that his eyes were closed. As yet there were no sounds from Liang or Shen, only Xu's quiet movements. She guessed that he too had slept only briefly and had risen early, for she had yet to hear the hour drummed.

She slipped quickly along the roofs, scooting across onto the main hall's lower tiles. Stealing another glance at Xu, as he swung into a series of turns, she gripped the edge of the tiles and somersaulted over. She hung for a moment, then dropped silently to the ground and slipped behind the thick, square pillars.

Peering around one, she saw that Xu had his back to the main hall. She was conscious of a gaze on her shoulders and turned. The painting hung against the far wall, in a wide alcove. It was her jou fu Xu, father to her mother. She had always thought it stylised, stiff and formal, but

now she saw Xu's eyes, older and still more stern. There was a crinkle in the corner of his mouth which reminded her of Xu An Nuo, and she focused on that to strengthen her resolve.

Before the disapproving portrait was an altar, and resting on it - between burning incense sticks whose smoke had slowly coated the painting with fine, feathery ash - was a heavy casket. In front of the altar was another table, on which any objects of family pride were displayed. There were commendations from the court, and jou fu's book of poetry. And, given a central place, there was the ivory invitation to the Dowager Empress' entertainment.

She took it up swiftly, her fingertips suddenly clammy against the carvings. She had thought of taking items of clothing to make her disguise more plausible but now, with her fingers curling about the ivory, she knew she could take nothing more from here. This act severed her from all her relations; even An Nuo had not stolen from them.

She thought she sensed a stillness in the courtyard, as if Xu had stopped suddenly. She dared not turn to see. Instead she stepped slowly backwards until she felt the weight of the upright pillars at her back. Letting herself look over her shoulder, she saw that Xu still had his back to the main hall.

She had planned to be in and out before he awoke; her usual way out was impossible with him there. She tucked the invite into the inner pocket of her tunic. Reaching out she hooked a foot under the nearest stool, and gently, she lifted it from the wooden floor and moved it so that it rested close to the edge of the roof above her. She leapt towards the stool, pushing on an imaginary step to give herself extra power. She rose higher, until one hand caught the overhanging eaves. Even as the stool skittered and clattered across the wooden floors, she was pulling herself up onto the tiles. She scrambled noisily across them. Xu was still turning, his mouth opening to call Liang.

She stayed on the rooftops, navigating back towards the heart of the city and avoiding areas that stank of bitter charcoal and wet ashes. Many households were deserted, with belongings scattered in the courtyards. The sky was a sickening yellowy-grey, like fruit-mould, and she could only glimpse the sun as a disk behind the clouds. She hadn't heard the great bell call the hour since dawn. The bell regulated the city, drummed its slow heartbeat, and she wondered what could silence it. It was possible that the Imperial Court had fled, as it had done when the foreigners had invaded some forty years ago. Liu could not imagine that the ancient Empress was willing to surrender her city to invaders again, and certainly not before their guns were sighted on the approachways from the south.

She dropped into an abandoned house. Furniture lay out of order, and a screen hung ajar, as if the household had left hurriedly. Liu found some still-edible bread in the kitchen and ate it as she looked about. She had to assume that the imperial entertainments were still going ahead. That meant she had to arrive at the gate of the Zijin Cheng already guised as a god or a goddess. Liu suspected the theme was an excuse by Ci Xi to dress up as Kuan Yin, her favourite deity. A less compassionate goddess of mercy Liu could not imagine. So she sat cross-legged and uninvited in the stranger's house, recalling her childhood stories.

There had been the Monkey King and his arguments with Buddha, or Nu Wa and her consort Fu Xi, who had created the land. Perhaps the Queen Mother of the West, the mythical wise woman of the mountains? Or - and she smiled, at last - one of the Eight Immortals. Li of the Iron Crutch had walked the world as a beggar, and several of the others had been hermits.

It took her an hour to find everything she needed from various abandoned households. From one she took some ragged-cuffed scholar's robes, from another a fan made of feathers. A third yielded a scholar's hat. She tried them all on over her own suit and was satisfied. The only problem she saw with dressing as Li was that he was a man and, though her body was hidden by the purloined clothes, her lack of queue was apparent. She took the robes back off and rolled them into a bundle with her own.

It only took her a few rooftops to find a courtyard with bodies sprawled on the cobbles. Their arms and legs were unnaturally twisted. The black rips across their torsos and heads were humming, and she realised they were swarms of fat-bodied flies, crawling over wounds. Liu tied a scrap of material over her nose and mouth, then dropped into the thickened air.

Even through the silk, she could smell the flesh decaying in the sun. She knelt near one of the men of the group. He lay on his front, so that she could not see his face, but she could still see the clotted pool of blood beneath him. His queue remained, lying like a thick, dead snake on his back. Liu took careful grip of it near the base. Her trembling knuckles nearly brushed the extended tendons in the man's neck, and she bit back a cry. She had seen dead men before, had kissed the dead faces of her mother and the son who had killed her as he'd been stillborn. She still saw, at odd and uncomfortable moments, the head of Chin Liang Yu rolling across the ground in Guangzhou. This, though, felt like a violation. For all that they had talked of changing the land, none of the men of Po Chi Lam had cut off their hated queues.

She pulled the blade in her other hand upwards, through the thick braid of hair. She could feel the straining hairs pulling at the nape of the scalp and lifting the slack skin. It took her several attempts to saw through the queue, until she was cursing the dead man for clinging onto it after death. As the last lock ripped free, she fell backwards and landed roughly on the cobbles.

Weaving the loose ends in with thick silk cord, she knotted and tied it. She sewed the fatter end into the back of the scholar's hat, then swiftly put the robes over her own clothes. In the grimy mirror she found in one of the rooms, she thought she might well pass for a young court official disguised as Li.

Dressed as a scholar, even an apparently poor one, she found that her way was easier. At the gate to the inner city, the jittery guards suggested routes she could take to avoid the worst of the fighting. She bowed briefly to them and took the longer route they suggested. She was due to present herself at the Hsi Hua Men of the Zijin Cheng at the toll of six, but the drum had not sounded all day and she did not want to get caught up in the voracious fighting.

Ahead, in a tree-lined square in the shade of the red imperial walls where stone tables were scored with grids for chess games, there was the loud and persistent clattering of an excited crowd. The chant of *kill, kill, kill* threaded through the other shouts like a steady drumbeat. Liu paused to let the mob exhaust itself. The people had something surrounded. Liu could only see the shaking backs of the men who jostled in the centre, and the people pushing at the edges trying to see within. The tight knot of the crowd was unravelling, to follow a man who held something black and bloody in his hands. Liu glimpsed dark sockets and a slack mouth. It was not the head of a foreigner: it was a Han.

As the cult member strode away, the mob followed, still shouting for death. Liu had to walk past the mutilated body once they were gone. Its arms and legs had been hacked at before the fatal blows to the neck, and the man's fine clothes were black with blood.

She bundled all her belongings together and left them beneath one of the chess tables. She could not risk attempting to take so much as a knife within the walls. As she walked slowly towards the gate, she took slow breaths, making herself focus on drawing energy up her spine and then down through her organs to her tan chen. She had to look confident to bluff her way into the forbidding city. She had to *be* confident. She felt her spine straighten and stretch as she walked.

Though the gate itself was barred, a smaller postilion gate was open. It was just wide enough for two riders abreast and imperial

guards, dressed in black with red plumes in their helmets, stood in formation at the opening. Liu had seen a small group of people approaching, two matching carts dripping with importance, and had shifted her pace a little so that she fell into their wake. The guards parted for them, then closed again. Beyond, servants were deftly inspecting people for weapons, turning up their sleeves. Others checked the ivory invitations. They were scared, as Liu had hoped; made skittish by the noise beyond the walls, and by the number of guests arriving.

Then she was being guided down paths lit with lanterns at foot level, and strewn with flower-petals. They skirted the great courtyards she had seen before, and emerged in acres of garden behind the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Strings of tiny white lanterns threaded through the trees, while thin strips of silk fluttered like prayer-flags. Scattered about the gardens were pavilions, each rich with feasts of food or huddles of musicians so that music and the tempting aroma of food drifted and mingled in the air. The strumming of lutes and the sound of pipes, along with the polite chatter of the crowd, masked the noise of the city beyond. The people were dressed in fine costumes, faces hidden with masks or fans, and Liu suddenly realised that she had dreamt this, or at least something similar. To one end of the garden was a stage, made of bamboo and straw, of the kind that might be erected in a village by a travelling troupe. Close to it was a two-tier structure of more permanence, with gilt balustrades and richly-painted wooden pillars.

Liu kept the feather-fan in front of her face as she made her way through the guests. She had to find a means to slip away, dodging the attention of the servants who stood discreetly by, and discover where - in this giant complex of buildings - the casket had been taken by Meng.

There was sudden shouting, and she thought for a moment that someone had recognised her. Servants in finer clothes, those of the highest permissible rank, were approaching; younger servants were clearing their way. And within their richly-embroidered embrace, walking slowly and with the aid of two ladies-in-waiting, was the Dowager Empress. She was dressed in pale white silk, so fine that it glowed in the lantern-light. As Liu had suspected, she had come as Kuan Yin. She Who Hears the Cries of the World, yet who was deaf to the sounds beyond her walls.

At a signal, every guest and servant in the gardens dropped to kow-tow.

Chapter Eleven

Liu had no difficulty dropping to her knees. She kept her head low and her face hidden. Doubtless the Empress had seen many people in audiences since she had frowned at Liu, but there was no reason to risk recognition now. Once Ci Xi had passed and entered the two-tiered building, the servants indicated that the guests could rise to attend the entertainment. A folk opera was being prepared, a traditional story to please the ruler.

Liu sipped cautiously at a small cup of wine; drinking enough that she did not stand out, but little enough that she kept her focus. She watched the guests. Although all were deferential towards the Dowager Empress' seating, they were talking at volume. She noticed that a few were discreetly tucking food into the wide sleeves of their costumes, but this was the only sign of the turmoil outside the walls. She took a few sweet pastries herself, letting most of them slip into her own sleeves and openly eating a few. Occasionally, a guest or two would walk confidently towards the gateway into the gardens, and be escorted beyond it by an eunuch. Liu supposed that they wished to pass water, but were too conscious of their face to use the bushes as some others were.

Torches had been lit all about the stage, and a group of finely-dressed musicians began to drum out the opening song of the opera. There were cheers as two thin men, dressed as women with stiff white-painted faces, ran on. Long banners streamed behind them: one red, one blue. As the drumming increased in tempo, they danced the battle between the earth and sea. With the majority of the guests watching the stage, Liu wandered towards the gateway, careful to make her path unsteady. A servant came forward and began to guide her towards a febrile passageway without a word. The area was empty; none of the guests would dare go missing during the performance.

Liu stumbled, the typical accidental half-fall of the suddenly drunk, and the servant took a single pace ahead. As he turned to check on her, she rose into a spinning back-kick with her right foot which caught his jaw and snapped him sideways. She followed through with her left fingers, the pads quickly pressing a key pressure-point behind his ear until he fell into a unconscious slump.

She peeled off the scholar's robes. She bit at one ragged seam with her teeth until she could pull away a long strip of dark material, which she tied about her face. She had to take every slight advantage she could, hiding her face in the shadows. Her first move was away

from the gardens, along the passageway she had been led down.

She had, realistically, no idea where to start.

She turned her back to the wall to start with, hurrying through a broad gateway into a warren of halls. Turning a little, following some instinctive urge to randomise her path, she saw that she was in a great hall with many rooms leading off it. This was a private space, forgotten and forlorn. Liu realised she must be in the halls where the former concubines lived, idling away their days in the past, crafting gossip over long-dead events. She heard slow footsteps approaching, a shuffling so like her ngoi po's that she almost cried out.

Liu waited, pressed back in an alcove, for the matronly woman and her two maids to pass her. Their faces were pursed like sour apples, and they rustled like fallen leaves as they went by. Once she was certain that they had turned into a room beyond her, Liu stepped out, only to glimpse white in the edges of her eyes. She slid back into the alcove and waited.

There were no footsteps. Perhaps it was silk hangings, caught by some breeze and swirling into the passageway. She risked a glance and saw nothing. Cautiously, she drifted along the old wooden floors, her feet gliding along the smooth surfaces. She reached a crossing-point, the spot where she had imagined the white, and saw it again. It was billowing as if in a strong wind on a high mountain, yet there was not even a whisper of a breath against Liu's face.

The swathes of silk were like a cloud, patterns forming and reforming in the writhing whiteness. Within it, Liu saw a face. It was as pale as the cloth, and she wondered if she could be imagining it, as an opium-eater sees other worlds in the oily smoke of the den. Then scowling brows and long, unkempt hair formed dark features, and Liu realised that this was no illusion. She recognised the woman she had glimpsed in the Hanlin Yuan, and in the street. The woman was weeping, a long wailing song of loss and regret that rose and fell like the cries of a curlew in the far distance.

Liu ran forward, trying to catch up with the woman, and - as in the street before - the pale, filmy material danced away from her and slipped around a corner. Another passageway stretched ahead, and already the figure was vanishing about the far end. Liu knew she was making noise as she ran, but knew that she must keep hold of the vision in some way. She ran down another long path and turned another corner, to find herself in an intimate garden.

The woman in white was in the centre of its courtyard. She was not moving, and no wind breathed even faintly against Liu's prickling skin, yet her robes still roared in high gales. The white fabric beat the

air and flickered across the woman's face. She had paused, her mouth open slightly, and was looking at the slowly-refilling bamboo water-fountain with tightened brows. It was the same puzzled concentration of a child learning its first character. Liu followed her gaze, and they watched for a moment as the device wavered, then tipped forward with another echoing crack.

'It is a type of clock,' Liu offered.

The woman looked sharply at her and said something. It was only then that Liu realised she could not hear the vicious beats of the fabric, or the woman's voice. The nape of Liu's neck prickled so that she could feel each fine hair rise. She had grown up with the stories of the Wooden Bridge Inn, of fox-spirited women, of the ghosts of unhappy deaths that refused to move on into the heavens. Now, her instincts were reacting as if there were a spirit in front of her.

'It marks time,' Liu explained.

The woman frowned and repeated herself. Liu tried to watch her lips, but the word was too short to understand.

This was madness, Liu realised. She was a rational person, she was not a superstitious peasant, and yet here she stood acting like a fool from a folktale. She strode forward, and this time the woman stayed in place at her approach. Close enough that Liu knew she should be feeling the passage of the silk through the air. There were still no physical sensations, but she finally heard the faintest whisper of a word.

'Time.'

Liu's hand reached for the woman's arm, but found nothing. The woman's face crumbled, and she opened her mouth into a silent screaming. The non-existent silk exploded, the threads encircling and tearing through Liu. There was a fleeting sense of a hot, dusty emptiness, two-thousand-thousand sunrises and sunsets in a barren red land. Blooms of plant-life carpeting a wide valley, and then gone in the blink of an eye. And always, always, the warm solidity of jade clutched against dry skin. Liu staggered, her feet disrupting the pattern of stones at the edge of the garden path, and found she was alone.

In her comfortable world back home, debating life in tea-rooms, it was nothing to dismiss the nonsense people spoke about the spirits. Firecrackers to drive out ghosts, lion-dances to bless a venture. It was the foolishness which helped to keep the land back, which helped to create the notion in foreigners that they were all peasants to be exploited. But in the amber light, her body still tingling as if every nerve had been plucked by dead fingers, it was all too easy to imagine

that the spirit of the body from the tomb had risen.

Liu heard a faint, sharp bell ringing out. It was metallic, mechanical in its striking of an hour. The chimes came distantly, from the buildings ahead of her, and she followed it. Time, the tomb spirit had said, but the same inflection meant within or even the name of the empire itself. Behind Liu, the bamboo fountain marked another minute with a hollow crack.

She headed southward now, moving through a gateway into another wide courtyard. This was barren stone and three times the width of the garden. The gate had been to the side of a low hall. A set of shallow steps rose to it and, from within, she heard the mechanical clicks of timepieces. There was the slow beat of pendulum clocks, and the whirling hum of a rotating mechanism. Some were chiming the hour, counting it in bells.

The lantern above the central doorway of the hall was lit, and the pool of light it created illuminated two servants who were even now rising from their crouches. Bamboo gaming-chips were scattered down the steps as they were dropped from plump hands.

'We regret to inform you that no-one may enter the hall of the clocks at the present time, my lady, by order of her most gracious and benevolent Empress,' one of them informed her.

Liu smiled behind her mask. Why would two junior servants be posted to mind the room now, if there were not something newly-important within? She took the shallow steps two at a time, and was pleased to see the servants nervously glance at one another. These were not guards who ventured out of the Zijin Cheng; they could not comprehend people disobeying the order of the Empress. One of them came forward to the edge of the top step to bar her path, whilst the other stayed anxiously in the doorway.

Liu dodged about the first easily, then turned around and twisted her fingers in his shoulder-muscles. It was easy to trap a nerve and immobilise him so that he stood on the edge of the step, his breath shallow and his eyes panicked.

'You will be fine,' she reassured him. 'I just need some time.'

The other servant was running over to the side of the door, his hand reaching for a long line of bells which hung there. If he raised the alarm then she might face more serious opposition. She kicked into a flying leap, clattering into the eunuch with her arms wide and clumsily pushing him to the floor. His fingers brushed the end of the bell rope, and it trembled faintly. Not enough to rouse any real guards, she hoped. The servant struggled beneath her, stinking of cloves and urine, and she cuffed him with an elbow. She jumped into

a crouch, twisting until she was able to press her knee into his windpipe. His hands flailed at her, and his legs kicked, but he lacked the leverage. She grabbed one of his wrists with her hand and held it above his head, then pressed her other hand's fingers into his temple. He went limp with a gust of foul breath.

Liu knelt back. Both men would live, though they may have to abscond to avoid the punishments when their failure was discovered. She rose slowly and glanced at the first disabled servant.

He was falling lifelessly to the ground, a wide slashing wound across his throat. A black-clad figure stood over him and looked up to see Liu's fury.

It was the crow-woman.

Liu recognised the sharp, narrow features and the bony body as it watched her from the other side of the doorway. She couldn't see a weapon, but the servant had clearly had his throat ripped open with a blade, so she had to assume there was one.

A clock whirred into the quarterly chimes.

Liu moved first. She leapt into the air, imagining a high surface from which to kick herself still higher. She flew towards the other woman with her right leg out in a side-kick and her left tucked up beneath her. The side of the foot connected, snapping at the woman's shoulder. The force of it pushed the crow-woman sideways, but to Liu's surprise the Westerner converted Liu's momentum into a roll and regained her feet. Liu sensed rather than saw the blade slicing towards her calves, and jumped high. Kicks were best against a bladed opponent, as they kept the torso out of reach, so she converted the jump into a front shadowless kick and felt some satisfaction as her sole smashed into the woman's face.

Sensing a blade again, she raised her arms to block, and was startled to feel cold metal deflected down her forearms. The blade belonged to the woman's shadow. Sheer instinct had made Liu block so that the flat, and not the edge, had caught her. The other woman was looking uncertain, as if few adapted to this shadow-fighting so quickly. They circled one another, edging in towards the clock room instead of out into the open space, and Liu realised that the crow-woman must be seeking something within as well.

Inside was a room rich in clockwork, lit by red lanterns. Liu took it in with the edges of her eyes. She rapidly assessed where the larger furniture was, and the low items which could be jumped over. Every surface contained a clockwork device of some kind, wound up and ready to play. Small toys sat waiting to be brought to life. At the back, a large automaton was paused in the midst of a chess game. The faint

beats of the clocks were discordant as they fought for dominance.

And sat on rich silk, glowing brighter than the lanterns, was the casket. She had lost it once through indecision, and through her failure in a fight; she was not going to fail again.

She tilted backwards, bending her spine so that the shadow's sabre swung through the air above her horizontal torso. Continuing the movement, she kicked her legs up and landed a glancing touch on the shadow's head. She knew she had to get to the crow-woman to disable the shadow as well. The woman was advancing, but looking about in confusion, her green eyes not fully-focussed on the fight. She looked like someone puzzled by the world after a long dream. Liu spun into a low roundhouse kick, aiming her lower shin at the other woman's kneecap to immobilise her. The woman raised her leg so that their shins smashed painfully into each other. This woman could fight, but did not know how to channel her energy into the blows. If it were not for the sharp-bladed shadow, Liu could have won this battle easily.

Before Liu could rebalance herself, the other woman landed a hard, straight punch in her stomach. Liu's muscles tightened, preventing the shock of the blow from reaching her organs. Her diaphragm rippled from the punch and her lungs gasped for a breath. Then the crow-woman was pushing past her towards the casket.

No. She would not lose it this way again. It was hers, not this foreign witch's. Liu straightened and took a calming breath. Then she aimed a shadowless kick, a kick faster than the shadows, and was pleased to find it connecting with the crow-woman's bodiless partner. The shadow fell back, one arm vanishing as if clutching at its stomach, but there was no time to wonder at it. Even as Liu was landing, she was spinning to snap a kick onto the foreigner's calf muscles, causing the woman to drop to one knee before the casket. Liu took three quick steps and reached for the prize before her opponent could take it.

Their fingers touched the jade at the same moment. Liu felt energy surge up her arm and disperse through her whole body, tingling through every nerve and pressure-point so that she had no choice but to gasp out loud. The crow-woman's own mouth opened in surprise, and her green eyes widened as she finally recognised Liu.

'You!'

Book Three: Te

Chapter One

Strawberries, cherries and a stolen kiss in spring. Octavia knew they were not her experiences, not part of her biodata memory. They belonged to the stranger, locked into the casket with her. She recognised now what had first snagged at her instincts when she met the translator at the Grieves', her ritual-heightened senses grasping another witchblood. It was newly-awakening, only just triggered and not yet aware of its full abilities. It had latched onto Octavia, recognising itself in her own blood, unravelling biodata with delight. Octavia saw her own past winding into a cats' cradle with Liu's. That was her name; Liu. She was solemnly learning to say it for a pretty woman whose heavy belly would kill her. Liu Hui Ying. Looking out of a screened window, she saw a weeping willow tree. The clocks ticked and cut at time.

No. She was Cousin Octavia of House Paradox. Strategist and leader of the remaining Red Burial. The eighth and not the first. She had been born and raised in an Old Town tenement, with a gutter running through it and refuse thick with vermin. The courtyards of her fu's house were wide and richly-painted. His new wife opened the shutters before the mourning period was over, saying that a young tree should not be denied the light.

The high grey walls were mealy-eyed, the light draining of energy before it ever reached the bedridden sister. Forming letters slowly, Liu read aloud from the Edinburgh *Herald*. Her father, a fair dreamer of a man, brought the papers home. They were to be used for kindling, but Liu would snatch them up first to read aloud to Effie. To give her a glimpse of the worlds beyond the fetid room. She read of the volcanic eruption west of Java, struggling with the foreign words. The world-shifting event had, she knew now, triggered her own metamorphosis by waking her witchblood. The pendulums swung, slicing time into fragments.

No. Liu was an only daughter. She did not nurse a sibling in a grey Northern light. These were the crow-woman's memories. Octavia. Cousin Octavia. Octavia Sutherland, spirit medium, cultist, traveller in time. The jade casket was acting as conduit; the trembling energy she had felt from it before was magnified and focused now. She wanted to take her hand away, stop the tangling of the pasts, but she was not willing to surrender to Octavia.

Octavia pulled at the casket, her knuckles whitening as the bone stretched the skin. Liu was refusing to release her grip. The casket scraped on the tabletop as they tussled with it, one-handed, between

them. Then there was a *snick*, a smooth, sliding murmur, and the two women fell apart.

Liu's roll spun her across the surface of the table to crash against the chess automaton's game. Octavia staggered back, her feet struggling to stay on the ground. Both held half of the casket in their hands.

Where it had split apart, it was not splintered or jagged. A series of tiny joints were carved into the jade, all sloping angles and grooved channels. Even in the red lantern-light, Octavia could see a squared-off pattern cut on every plane. This had been *designed*.

She had to get the other half back from Liu.

The other woman rose smoothly to her feet. Octavia could still feel tendrils of information coiling and weaving between them. Their two hearts hammering in time with the tick-tick-tick of the clocks, their panting breaths as sharp and shallow as each other. The girl was good, a trained fighter with bird-fast reflexes, but she lacked two things: a weapon and a killing heart. Octavia had both. Octavia would win this. She told it to herself over and over, repeating the mantra so that the witchblood began to twist it into both their futures. A few steps forward and her shadow drifted hard by Liu as she straightened. Its sabre-arm swung.

Liu rolled behind the automaton, raising its passive metal arm to deflect the blade. She was at a disadvantage. She knew she had to keep moving, to go on the offensive, or else she'd be cut down. Her free hand moulded itself briefly to the bronze shoulder in front of her, and she propelled herself upwards. If she stayed high and away from the walls, the shadow would struggle to reach her. She alighted briefly on the table and rose again into the air as the shadow swung at her. The tip of the immaterial blade caught at her, slicing silk and skin.

Liu tumbled to the floor, her fingers letting the jade slip as she hit. The casket spun into the air, implausibly slow to her fluttering senses. Before she could recapture it, the other woman had caught it one-handed. Octavia backed across the room, her shadow retreating with her, as she looked at the two separate segments in her hands. Liu saw her try to bring them together, frowning as the trick of it eluded her. Rolling upright, she launched a series a snapping, flying kicks at Octavia, pummelling the westerner's defensive arms.

Octavia reeled back at the assault. The Chinese woman was fast, faster than their shadows. The impacts rang through the muscles and bones of her aching arm, and her injured hand lost its grip. One half of the casket slipped free, to skitter across the polished floor and spin to a stop halfway under a cabinet. Liu was staying airborne, touching surfaces only to propel herself upwards again. Octavia was impressed;

the woman was adapting her strategy.

As a spinning roundhouse kick was directed at her head, Octavia leant backwards and knocked into a display table. She felt behind her, finding curved glass under her fingers. She grasped a solid, brassy weight, and the twirling of a spring that uncoiled time through a rotating pendulum, then raised it up to throw.

'Please,' a calm female voice said in English. 'Try not to damage the clocks.'

Standing beneath the entrance-lantern was a woman. She was broad, with a strongly-built frame made bulkier by the layers of clothing. Her face was white with make-up; her brows thick like calligraphy strokes, quirking at them from above dark almond eyes. She wore rich robes of the finest pale silk, delicately embroidered in many colours. Wide, stiff sleeves were folded back to reveal inner layers in the palest blues, pinks and golds. Her hair was raised, bound into a complex chignon, and decorated with precious gems for flowers. It was a rich, deep and stubborn red.

Octavia recognised it then. The power radiating from this woman. She knew the figure before her from the reports.

Or "myths", as Cousin Ursula would have called them.

'Compassion,' she said.

Liu, standing straight but for her bowed head, looked sharply sideways at her.

'This is Ci Xi. She is merely guised as Kuan Yin, Goddess of Compassion.'

Octavia laughed, and folded her arms.

'Your signature is overpowering. I knew there was a timeship in the area, and I should have known there was only one timeship likely to be operating on her own. The ghost at Mrs Grieves' death-bed was you as well, wasn't it? Putting on a show? Or are you as trapped here as we are?'

The woman folded her own arms, tucking thick-fingered hands adorned with rings and nail-guards into the sleeves of her robes. Her face remained impassive.

'That was not me,' she stated, without emotion.

Octavia scowled. 'The hair, the robes… I knew it was a timeship… and here you are. What are you up to, Compassion?'

'Who are you to demand anything of the Empress?' Liu interrupted. Octavia sensed an unwilling defensiveness from her, ingrained and grudging, and Octavia caught a faint twitch of a smile on

Compassion's face.

The Homeworld and timeships; one was always hard by the other. The Great Houses had designed themselves vessels not so much for travelling in time as for re-processing history, mathematical constructs whose n-dimensional equations were so vast and complex that they couldn't help but intersect with the world of matter. At some point the Houses had decided to make the ships sentient, or at least sentient in the human, comprehensible sense of the word, probably so that the pilots could at least *pretend* to understand and communicate with their charges. Compassion had been the first hybrid prototype; the 102-Form, bred from human flesh and Homeworld technology, born of a sentient timeship which had - so tale told - died in the birthing. The progeny had been running ever since, one of the few entities in the universe that the Homeworld could never quite predict and never quite pin down, although there'd been talk of a brief and never-explained alliance between the two.

So went one version. The other was very similar in narrative, but for the detail that there'd been a conscious Homeworld life-force which had moulded the men of the Houses (and naturally, in this version they'd all been *men*) to suit her needs, then guided them to create her daughters the timeships. In that variation, the ships had always been sentient but had indulged their pilots like a doting mother with a toddler son. It was a much bloodier version, that rejoiced in the biological elements of the story, but it ended the same way: with Compassion a free agent, no longer bound to any world or any side. As far as anyone knew.

'Aren't you supposed to be on the run?' Octavia asked her. 'I understood your seniors were keen to find you.'

'It looks like your own senior's coming to find *you*,' Compassion said.

And Octavia realised why the woman's face looked so strained, under the thick make-up. 'You're holding them back, aren't you? The network that's protecting this city from the time-active powers; that's your doing.'

'I'm controlling the energy, yes.'

'That's why you're putting on the whole imperial façade. If you're Ci Xi, then you control the power of the land. The chi energy that makes it so difficult to get into this place.'

Compassion nodded, once and without feeling. Octavia had sensed that the Faction gunship was there, just above the city and half a universe away, and now she knew that when the gunship got through the mission would be over. Prester John was her superior; he'd been

pleased that she'd been willing to go back into the field, but doubtful of her objectives. Having to come and collect her like an errant schoolgirl would hardly put him in a good mood, and he was well-placed enough in the Eleven-Day Empire to make his displeasure dangerous. And with Compassion involved there was the risk of a Homeworld incursion and confrontation, something they were ill-prepared for.

If she wanted to recover her position, then she had as long as Compassion chose to hold the warship back. Unwillingly, her eyes glanced at the fallen half of the casket.

Before she'd even thought about reaching for it, Liu had stepped up to block her way. Compassion tilted her head slightly, looking unimpressed.

Octavia swore; she should have grabbed it sooner, instead of letting herself be distracted. She needed to regroup her thoughts and pick out the best options, but her blood was still singing in her head from the ritual, her hands still stained red.

Then Compassion stepped forward, and Octavia noticed that the way to the courtyard was free. There'd be other servants, perhaps, or guards with sharp swords. She could handle that. Get out, get free, then get a plan together to snatch the other half of the casket before Prester John or the Homeworld arrived.

Octavia dodged about the furniture and plunged down the steps, running fast and light, with the jade held tight to her chest.

The Dowager Empress raised an eyebrow, then turned back to Liu.

Liu was trembling. Under her breath, she cursed that she had not been fast enough to stop Octavia fleeing with half of the casket. Her muscles began quivering as the adrenaline that had pushed her on for the day wore thin and poisonous. She should be relaxing, letting those muscles shake themselves loose. Instead she had frozen like a schoolgirl awaiting punishment when the Dowager Empress had walked in.

She hadn't understood the conversation. The glimpses and impressions of Octavia's world had been about blood and death, not "Compassion". She had been surprised, too, that they had spoken in Cantonese throughout.

'Let her go. They're always running in a crisis. Not very good on consequences, ironically.' The Empress turned, her ivory shoes clicking faintly in time to the tick of the clocks. 'Liu Hui Ying, I really ought to have you summarily executed for failing to kow-tow.'

Liu knew it was too late; she should never have remained on her feet when the woman had entered the room, so a show of fealty now would be meaningless. Since she would die anyway, she may as well die honest.

Ci Xi waved a dismissive hand at her before she could speak.

'I'm *not* the great and illustrious Dowager Empress, Liu. Ci Xi's still in her theatre. Octavia was right; I am Kuan Yin.'

The woman's features altered. The thick make-up was absorbed into the skin, and the face narrowed into the finer shape of a classical Han beauty, though her hair remained a darkened red. Her figure slimmed and became sinuously tall, the robes somehow matching the shift in shape.

Liu was not superstitious. There were no ghosts; the rituals of the cultists were no more than incitements to killing; and Kuan Yin was a story. She Who Heard the Cries of the World, a goddess for the powerless. If the energy spent praying for her interventions could be used to reform the country, then how many more injustices would be righted? No; Liu was not superstitious, yet she could not explain the power that had transfixed her to the casket, nor the knowledge and sensations that had tumbled into her from Octavia, nor the transformation of the figure before her. She could not think clearly in this room, with its discordant ticking of so many timepieces.

'I failed,' she stuttered, her tongue stumbling.

'Yes, but that's not important. Meng has returned most of the artefacts to imperial possession, and he'll be showered with favours, assuming he survives the war. I doubt her fragrant majesty will even bother to inspect the treasures. You didn't mean that, though, did you?'

Liu bowed to hide her head from the other woman's gaze. She had been read so easily, so quickly, and she was annoyed by that as much as by her failure.

'However,' Kuan Yin continued, 'the casket hasn't been lost in its entirety. Pick up the half that's left.'

The floor beneath the half-casket had new scratches, fine-lined and pale. The jade was warm in Liu's hands when she took it. The glow which had drawn her was gone. The stubs of the locking side pressed into her palms, and her thumb ran over the intricate carvings of a dragon as it reared upwards in flight. She held it for long moments, treasuring the desire for it, before turning to give it to the figure before her.

Kuan Yin took it from her gently. She had smooth hands, cool and

yet humming with chi. She did not feel like other humans, but as if she were at one remove.

‘Did you feel a connection with Cousin Octavia?’

Liu nodded reluctantly. They had been foreign memories. Not just the steel skies and pinched white faces, but loving and losing a sister, and the responsibility of earning the family wage. No wonder the foreigners marvelled even at the slums of Guangzhou, if their world was as grey as she had sensed it.

‘You’ve got more in common than you think,’ Kuan Yin continued. ‘You’ve got blood.’

‘That is not possible. She is from England -’

‘I’m not talking about physical blood. You’ve got witchblood. That means you’ll be able to recover the rest of the casket.’

Chapter Two

Her flight from the Forbidden City had been swift. The bodies lay where they'd fallen under her shadow's blade, and the alarm had yet to be raised. Even as Octavia dropped back down into the chaotic streets, she was recovering her thoughts.

She couldn't retrieve the other half of the casket from Liu or Compassion, but she could try to reach it elsewhere. She'd gone over the fragments of the casket before, the hints of it in histories, back in her rooms in the Eleven-Day Empire. Every moment of its existence had been locked and barred to her, except this one, but now she knew who was behind the barriers she was sure she could work her way around them. If she were to reach it sooner, before it had been entombed or during the Grieves' journey back to Peking, then she'd be able to possess it.

The other woman, Liu, had witchblood but no idea how to use it; if Compassion had been using her to gain the casket, then Octavia had the advantage in experience and training. Unless Compassion transported her, of course. It was possible, though Octavia doubted a timeship would welcome the presence of witchblood on board, especially *that* timeship. Having a biological source gave Compassion a biodata trace which could be corrupted. It was one of the reasons the Homeworld was so keen to hold her. So it was more plausible that Compassion was using Liu as an independent agent, rather than a fellow traveller.

She could be training the girl to use her witchblood, but would a novice like Liu risk her life in an unshielded jump? Even experienced witchbloods blanched at the idea. Octavia remembered the burning desire she'd sensed from the other woman, a desire matching her own, a fire that had been fed as their witchblood had tangled together and would be fed further by Compassion. Liu wanted the casket as strongly as Octavia herself. It had become a matter of face, of honour.

Octavia had more firepower, though. And she had support. She had an engine of the War.

At the ghost station, Ursula's train stood idle in the dusk-light. Lanterns had been raised, casting pools of warmth over the might-have-been platform. Half a dozen men, dressed in Chinese peasant tunics, squatted in a circle of light; cards clutched to their chests, coins clattering onto the ground before them. One threw Octavia a lazy salute as she arrived, tapping his brow casually in a familiar

gesture. She looked more closely at him. Beneath the round face and the dark queue she sensed a tall, thin man with a sloppy dark fringe and Spanish eyes. He was familiar. One of the Red Burial, programmed so that his biodata mimicked a non-combatant, but his underlying loyalty was to her.

'Cousin Jaime,' she greeted him. 'The reprogramming has taken well.'

'Thanks, Cousin. Good to be under your command again. Can't say much for the other one.' He stood as he spoke to her, and his eyes flicked towards the first-class carriage. Octavia shrugged at him.

'Homeworlder. What can one do?'

As Jaime folded his legs under him to rejoin the taroc game, Octavia offered him a brusque wave that could have been read as another salute.

As a cult with alleged anarchist tendencies, Faction Paradox really shouldn't have felt so comfortable with a chain of command or a hierarchy, nor with a system of gestures to indicate subservience. In reality, with a political power-structure in the shadowy Parliament and the War becoming increasingly militaristic, agents at ground-level tended to let slip casual salutes based solely on respect. Octavia disliked it now. She'd been happy enough when she'd been a Little Sister, earning her promotion on sidereal battlefields, but the Red Burial made her feel guilty. As if she ought to be more responsible.

Cousin Ursula was perched on her chair of bone, gazing at the pockmarked surface of her scrying-table. The monitors around the walls were showing screen-saver patterns, silent floral explosions of fractals and howlround. A skinny Little Brother in a blood-red silk shirt sat before them, staring unblinkingly into the pseudo-vortices on the screens.

'How soon can you be ready to go?' Octavia asked.

'Go where, exactly?' Ursula replied, without looking up.

'Wherever I say.'

Ursula was making notes on a pad. Octavia suspected it was purely to suggest that she had better things to do than pay attention.

'You *are* aware that we're stranded?' she said. 'We've had to call on Prester John for retrieval. Even if we were in a position to move, I don't think you'd be in a position to command it.'

'Prester John made me First Cousin on this trip. He gave me command -'

'A point I'll be sure to remind him of, when he breaks through and

wants to know why he's had to come to this dump at all.'

Octavia rested her palms on the edge of the table, rocking the mammoth's shoulder-blade till the blood on its surface ran like black mercury. Ursula looked up, scowling, as the patterns streamed into new formations. Then she smirked.

'Look,' she tried, in the sort of patronisingly reasonable voice she reserved for dense non-Homeworlders, 'you've got to accept that you're not field-agent material any more. No-one's going to judge you; you can go back to your cubby-holes and your research. Force me to move this train, even if it *could* be moved, and you risk losing it. The Military Wing is already overstretched. We can't afford to put this shrine in jeopardy.'

Ursula didn't add "or me, either", but her face deliberately showed it. She was being practical, realistic, fixing things as she always did. It was the hint of pity in Ursula's voice that Octavia despised.

She turned on her heel, striding out with her head straight and resisting the urge to sniff theatrically. In the carriage's vestibule, out of sight of all and with one foot half-dropped to the top step, she sagged briefly. Stepping down, spine straightening, she saw Cousin Jaime throw her another lazy salute.

She did still have the Red Burial.

They were heavily-depleted, true, massively reduced from the full squad she'd led on Valentine's Day. But she had twenty here, programmed and - she hoped - still loyal to her. The respect they accorded her meant she had to be responsible, though. If she were to use the Burial to seize control of the train, then she needed co-ordinates ready to feed in before Ursula could counter the hijack or Prester John could arrive to shut the whole operation down.

Mrs Grieves' possessions, the sketches and diaries she had doubtless kept during the Grieves' adventures, could hold enough clues. Octavia thought of the climb back to the Legation, the need to infiltrate unnoticed, and sighed. She was becoming heartily sick of walking.

At night the cities within the walls lit up the sky, the fires hazy like sodium streetlights. Octavia slipped rapidly along the now-familiar paths between the ghost station and the Legation. On the carriage park, Chinese cannons pointed towards the Legation's walls, but their crews were rolled into cocoons of blankets as they slept. She moved through them like an apparition, blending into shadows and dreams, until she was scaling the bullet-ridden barrier and dropping back into the British Empire.

Somewhere, in one of the interior buildings, a child was wailing. Its

voice rose and fell in a siren, triggering restlessness in the tense, overcrowded enclosure. Armed men were leaning against their positions, hugging their rifles to themselves and looking at her with sleepy eyes. Her drifting figure had become familiar to them over the last few weeks.

Mrs Grieves' room had been reassigned by the accommodation committee. A family of four had been installed in the dead woman's place, and the younger daughter told Octavia that the body had been taken to the makeshift mortuary in-between the British and Russian Legations. Her possessions, well-travelled trunks and a worn leather bag with her initials on it in flaked-away gold ink, had been hastily packed and moved to an uninhabitable storeroom.

Once there, Octavia began by rifling through the smaller bag, knowing that nothing as small and frequently-used as a sketchbook or notebook would be in the "not required on voyage" trunks. She easily broke the lock on the clasp. There was little of interest: the silver vanity set, a sewing kit, a worn collection of Tennyson poems tied up in a faded silk ribbon with the *Book of the Common Prayer*.

There was no sign of any notebook. Doubtless someone in authority had taken Mrs Grieves' valuables for safekeeping. Was there family to send the ear-bobs and bracelets and rings to? Would someone patiently search for relatives, and send the items with a kind and impersonal note? She could ask Miss Munroe. It was late, and the other woman should have retired by now, so Octavia discarded the travel-bag and hurried towards the quarters that the two of them had been sharing.

The small room, with its single wide bed and plain shutters, was muzzy in the summer heat; the fug of exhaustion seeping into the corners. Miss Munroe was curled about a thin pillow, the covers half-thrown-off in the humid air. Her hair was in a fat plait, and she grumbled as Octavia sat on the free side of the mattress. Her eyes opened heavily, still more asleep than awake.

'Oh, Miss Sutherland, I am sorry.'

'I should apologise for waking you. I know you've been working long hours.'

Miss Munroe propped herself up on one elbow and brushed the loose locks of hair out of her face. Her hand reached out to brush Octavia's forearm, briefly.

'No, I meant about Dr Morrison. I know the two of you were close. I mean, there was talk, gossip really, and I tried to ignore it, but -'

Octavia felt cold. Her skin goose-bumped and her spine turned into

fragile metal.

‘Morrison?’

‘Oh! Oh, my goodness!’

Miss Munroe was sitting up hurriedly, her eyes startlingly awake now.

‘I thought you knew. I thought that was where you’d been. In the hospital, I mean. Truly, I am terribly sorry -’

Octavia knew she was standing, turning towards the door. But she felt dislocated, as if it were some other person making the movements.

‘No, not yet,’ she said.

She was descending the stairs and crossing the courtyards. Behind her she heard Miss Munroe breathlessly running after her, pulling on a shawl over her night-dress. The hospital was the only lit building, its shutters leaking amber light onto the abandoned tennis-courts. When Octavia walked in, fierce and hard with tension, the volunteer nurse in the hallway backed away from her. Octavia realised the woman was staring at her blood-flecked arms. She heard Miss Munroe still babbling apologies, and caught the words directing her to a hall that had been converted into a men’s ward.

‘Ah, Miss Sutherland,’ one of the doctors greeted her as she entered.

‘Where is he?’

‘This way, please, miss,’ the man said, and led her to a bed near the window. ‘He did ask after you earlier, but I fear he’s slipping away from us fast. We’ve made him comfortable -’

‘You’ve doped him up so he won’t regain consciousness, you mean?’ she asked, then ignored his spluttered replies.

She could see Morrison now, unmoving on the bed. His fair hair was darkened with sweat, his shirt opened to reveal soaked bandages, slick with fresh blood. Each unconscious breath he took made his chest gurgle and splutter as fluid seeped into his lungs. She could smell the dark matter on his laboured exhales, the stench of the arterial blood popping in her nose. His left leg was ripped and bloodied, torn into by a bullet. Octavia didn’t need the doctor to tell her that Morrison was dying.

‘No, it’s too soon. You’re supposed to die an old man, with family all about you and the salty air of Devon in your ravaged lungs. It says so in your biography. I checked.’

Octavia took his right hand in both of hers. It was large and unresponsive, heavy between her palms. She could feel calluses from his pen and his revolver, gunpowder ground into the swirls of his

fingerprints.

‘I checked, you bugger,’ she told him. ‘This isn’t how it’s supposed to happen.’

She felt Miss Munroe press a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

‘He was defending Prince Su’s Palace, where the converted are. One of the Chinese carried him back, but it was no good. The doctors have made him comfortable. I thought you knew.’

‘It’s too damn soon! It -’

- it was one of the other time-active powers interfering, ensuring that one of her allies here (and she realised, belatedly, that he *had* become an ally) was out of the way. It was a big change; Morrison was relatively famous in this time. *The Times* had precipitously run an obituary for him on the 17th of July, when it had been assumed that the entire Legation had been killed. It was the 16th today. When she’d been researching it had been a side-note, the man who’d died twice, but now she suspected it had been the first hint that his timeline had been corrupting. He *was* supposed to be shot in the leg sometime during the Boxer Rebellion, disabled for half the siege. But he’d recovered, spending his invalidity filling notebooks with remarks about his fellow besieged.

His face was sunburnt across the cheekbones and crumpled about the eyes, like a man who laughed a lot or who stared into unknown lands with fierce curiosity. The blood beneath the tan had run away, leaving his face grey. She’d not seen him with his eyes closed before; he looked wrong, so immobile and frozen.

His hand weighed nothing in hers.

She let it drop to the bed and sat back. She heard Miss Munroe quietly talking to the doctor, her hand brushing Octavia’s shoulder in unwanted sympathy.

He’d had a notebook.

They’d been walking back from the Grieves’, that first night in Peking. He’d treated her with detached amusement, lightly quizzing her for an article he could never write. And as they’d walked, he’d had a notebook held loosely in his hand. She’d asked him what it was.

‘Grieves’ expedition journal. Our Professor has notions of publication, and wishes to know if the Times *would be interested.’*

‘And will it?’

‘I have no idea. My reports tend to involve rather more politics and rather less adventuring.’

‘Less adventuring, hah,’ she muttered. Grieves’ journal. Had it

survived the hurried evacuation of Morrison's study to the Legation? It was entirely possible. With Grieves murdered, the book had increased in value. With Mrs Grieves dead, her sketchbooks vanished and all the artefacts back in the possession of the court, it had become the only record of the expedition. It hovered now on the edge of vanishing from history, an account that could just as easily have been fiction with all the supporting evidence gone. Morrison, with his eye for a story, would have kept it.

He had been assigned a bed in a dormitory, but she knew his books had been stacked in Sir Claude's storerooms. One hazy afternoon he'd taken her there to find a copy of Lao Tze's book on warfare, to better explain the tactics of the Chinese military who'd joined the Boxers. His heavy Gladstone bag had been there, and he'd joked that as he hadn't been practising medicine until this siege he'd long used it to transport his journals.

Octavia shook herself free of Miss Munroe's light grasp. She leaned over Morrison's face briefly. He'd disliked her at first, hated what she and her kith stood for, but eventually he'd helped her just as he'd helped the scores of converts he'd taken to the shelter of Prince Su's Palace. She felt something raw in her throat, but knew enough to realise it was guilt, not grief.

'Please,' she said, distantly aware of her voice, 'I'd like to walk for a bit. Alone.'

Miss Munroe tightened her shawl about herself, and Octavia managed a distracted smile to reassure her.

It took under five seconds to open the lock of Sir Claude's storeroom. A simple five-bar mechanism that Octavia could have managed with a hairpin. Inside, crates rose as high as the ceiling. One set had GEM scrawled on them, just as she recalled. The Gladstone bag was shoved in a narrow gap. She popped the lock and opened it.

There were a dozen or more notebooks. She sank to sit cross-legged and started to look through them. She realised quickly that each one she opened had a neat Victorian hand filling every space, sprinkled with initials instead of names, private shorthand for events. She only needed to search for the notebook with different handwriting in it.

But it wasn't there.

Chapter Three

Liu rebelled. Not just at a conscious level, but down in her heart a petulant voice cried out that it was not true. This was a night-terror and she was moving into the moment of consciousness in which the sleeper realises events are malleable and fleeting.

'You doubt me, obviously,' Kuan Yin said. 'But really: *think*. How else do you explain what you've seen? A shadow that fights and kills?'

'It is possible Octavia has, through training, gained unknown abilities and can manipulate her energy as a true fighter does,' Liu suggested, trying the idea out cautiously on her tongue. It tasted watery and thin. 'An untrained observer sees Si Gung Wong's kicks as shadowless because he is so swift. Octavia's skills may be some variation of that. But to think it the result of supernatural blood? And that it enables one to travel in time? Time is not like the sea or the railway; it is not to be travelled on as if in a ship or a train.'

Kuan Yin glided over to the table beside Liu. Her hands, slim, pale and bejewelled now instead of the heavy claws of the Empress, picked up the mantle-clock whose glass was smeared with Octavia's bloodied handprints. She held it up so that the lanterns' light glowed on its dome, then balanced it on the palm of her hand, her eyes following the spinning and counter-spinning of the rotating ball-pendulums within.

'So. What *is* time?'

'A means of measuring the passage of events from the past to the present. Clocks and calendars mark the passage of time so that people can ensure their day is productive. Time provides discipline. The Westerners exploit time, as we would if we were not hidebound and superstitious.'

Kuan Yin was still watching the clock's twisting, ticking progress. Liu found herself listening for its mechanism over the many others in the room.

'In the West,' Kuan Yin said, 'they're servants to time. They set their clocks by the chimes of Big Ben, not by the setting and rising of the sun. Their trains carry London's time to the whole of Britain. Time is a commodity to them. Linear concepts of time suit them because they're traders, and they put value in things that are finite.

'But each person has a unique path through time and space, and only they can follow it. You're standing there now because you've come along one of those paths. The blood will let you see the path,

and see the interconnections. Let you travel the paths of others.'

When the angle of the gleaming dome was tilted just-so, the brass mechanisms within reflected light through the blood-marks on it.

'The passage of time is a straight one,' Liu said, less surely. 'A person is born, grows, grows older and then dies.'

'To be born again? Or to transcend the world and reside in the heavenly dimensions, as an immortal?'

Liu couldn't be sure whether Kuan Yin had meant that in all seriousness, whether it had been some strange joke, or whether it had been a means of testing her. She found that she'd drawn closer, unable to resist the play of light and pattern within the clock. Kuan Yin glanced at her and smiled indulgently.

'Here. Hold it.'

Liu felt cool, vital hands brush against her own, and then the weight of the clock was resting in her palm. Its underside was lined with felt, soft and pliant against her skin, and she could sense the tremble of the mechanism transmitted through the base and into her hand. She lifted one hand free and rested it briefly on the glass. Kuan Yin still held the other side of the dome gently.

'Na mo ho la da nu do la ye ye…' she began.

Liu looks up, startled. She knows this chant from her childhood, and Kuan Yin is smiling at her. She can feel the clock slicing away at them, and the room trembling about them, as fragile as a gossamer leaf. It seems as if the Hall of Clocks is full of people, staring and peering about or dismissively passing through. Or as if all the clocks and toys are gone and the Hall belongs to an older Emperor, who comes here to consult almanacs and star-charts. Slim western men in tall hats bow, presenting an orrery of gold and steel.

'The mechanism is quite delicate,' Kuan Yin says, and Liu looks at it. Really looks, for the first time. She sees tiny workrooms in attics, with shavings of brass glinting on the dusty floor. A westerner with sleeves encased in green felt is tightening a tiny screw. The tip of his tongue is sticking out and he frowns. Men in heavy clothing, sweat glistening on fire-reddened faces; their thickly-gloved hands dragging foundry-chains to bring burning crucibles to machines that are hammering and beating the metal into flexible sheets. One, a burly man with a salt-flecked beard and forearms scarred from burns, sits in a hard schoolroom with shoes whose soles are mended with cardboard.

The whirr of the clock in her hands brings Liu back again, until she sees another man taking it reverently. A former military man, dressed in stiff blue wool, his chest pinned with medals. She wants to reach out and touch

the metal and ribbon, the strongest and most focused part of the wavering world she is perceiving, but each one screams. There is the deafening, constant roar of cannon, the sour, sickening smell of men terrified into killing others. She turns away, knowing instinctively that there would be overwhelming choices if she were to follow that path. Instead she follows the man to India and up into the thin air of the Himalaya, where he barters for borders and information, sending back despatches sewn into parcels of fabric addressed to a non-existent wife. He thinks of it as the Great Game. And she can see Octavia too, the woman's burning determination to gain the jade casket, as strong as her own. Octavia has cut her blood-ties to the world as well.

Liu realises that Kuan Yin is next to her in the clear mountain air, one hand circling her wrist.

'So I can use this?' Liu asks.

She feels disjointed as the clock-hall in the Forbidden City re-emerged from the shadows of the Himalaya. Sunlight burning on the high slopes became lanterns' glows, and the dark valleys became the shallow depths of the room. It had been there, lying beneath the visions. Or perhaps the visions lay beneath the reality. The wooden floor felt strange and unreal under her feet.

'How could such visions help?' she asked.

Kuan Yin's slim hand released the clock, and touched Liu lightly on the shoulder. Her fine fingers brought up a flake of still-warm metal.

'You were there, briefly. Treading lighter than a butterfly through time. Through the web of connections.'

Liu remembered running into the orchard one early autumnal morning, to find pearlescent dew-laden spider-traps as high as her child-self, woven between branches and trees. The low, clear morning light had caught them, making them glow like drifting ghosts, but then she'd noticed the dark spots within and - looking closer - the flies and late bees. Swollen with blood or pollen, struggling weakly within. A moth, its wings as pale as the threads which held it, had coiled and uncoiled its antenna. There had been no sign of the spiders.

'Webs can trap butterflies,' she said cautiously.

'Only the ones who flit around without any aim. You're not aimless. Your wings are only just drying, but you know what you want.'

'The casket.'

Flicking away the metal shard, Kuan Yin nodded towards the remaining half of the jade relic. Liu didn't move to pick it up.

'It's safe, Liu. You can only access the bound histories if you use the chant. It decodes the information.' The red-haired woman clapped her

hands together lightly, her rings sending out pure notes. ‘There’s a lot for you to learn. You’ll soon figure out that this world, the world you’re gaining access to, is governed by laws just like the rational one is. Really, you can pick up the casket.’

Liu took the half that rested on the floor. Her fingers unconsciously traced the phoenix that danced along its side, and felt the stubby locks where it should have joined its other half.

‘Octavia will be trying to get to it first, I think,’ she said, after a long pause.

And if travel through time were possible, if it were possible to slip along hidden threads to the past or future, then Liu could reach whatever Octavia wanted before Octavia could. It couldn’t be the immediate past; she had to get to it before Octavia’s own blood could become entangled with it. Not just before tonight, but before they’d first connected with each other in the Grieves’ study.

She’d need something of the Grieves’.

Kuan Yin still had her dry hand about Liu’s wrist, and had been gently guiding her out of the hall, along shadowy paths in the Forbidden City. They were approaching a gate, and Liu looked up nervously, expecting the guards to halt them or react in some way to the beautiful woman by her side. Instead they bowed without much interest and waved them through. Looking sideways, Liu saw Kuan Yin’s features and clothing fall back into place; as if for one moment she had looked like someone else.

It took Liu a few seconds to recognise the square they entered, and to find the bundle of possessions where she had left them under a table. The world seemed sharper now, yet less real, as if she walked on some other plane.

‘I can use the casket to find the whole -’ she began.

‘No! No, that’s not a good idea, Liu. The casket’s powerful, it’s… lived many lifetimes. When you’ve learnt to control your skills, then maybe you can use the casket, but not yet. You might not be able to pull yourself back.’

Kuan Yin sat at the table, then gestured for Liu to join her. She opened the bundle of clothing and drew out Liu’s tunic.

‘Take up a corner of your old suit,’ she instructed.

Liu cautiously touched it, feeling the familiar embroidery under her fingers and raising the whiff of ash from the material. Behind her she could sense the comforting presence of Kuan Yin, the other woman’s energy enveloping her in a silky, protective cocoon. Without the goddess, this would have been impossible. Without the anchor that

Kuan Yin provided, she'd fracture and fly out like shattering glass. Nervous at first that she'd go back too far and find herself back in the flames of the Hanlin Yuan, she recited the tones that Kuan Yin had used, and then laughed as the world melted and reformed.

Around them, Prince Su's palace appeared. It glittered with gilt decoration and brightly-painted beams, but the visual delights were scarred with bullet-marks and the blackened soot of attempted arson attacks. Liu was confused and looked to Kuan Yin.

'Your time's been re-written,' the woman explained. 'To your friends from Po Chi Lam, you never left them that morning. You joined them here instead. You were let through the cordon by a Chinese commander who doesn't want to fight, and you talked the British into letting you help with medical aid. Now you can talk your way across into the Legation itself and find Mrs Grieves.'

Then she was gone, Liu half-imagining a sigh hovering on after the woman.

The noises and smells of her surroundings cut in.

The stench was so strong that it clutched at her throat. Hundreds of people - men, women and children - were crammed into the courtyards. Families had set up tiny camps, huddled together over meagre possessions. The younger men were working to shore up defences to the north, where the attacking gunfire cracked and popped against the walls. Several of them had roughly-bandaged wounds, the hastily-ripped material dark with blood. None were armed. In the kitchens, women who might once have had servants to cook for them struggled with what even Liu could see were desperate rations of brown rice.

The man she recognised as Morrison was kneeling over a groaning patient. His pale clothes, previously neatly-pressed, were marked with dirt and ugly splatters of dried blood. He had a leather belt slung across his shoulder, its tiny loops snug with shells, and another about his waist holding a holster to his hip. He looked up at her, saw the horror on her face and came over.

'I know how bad it is, Miss Liu, but I must thank you again for offering to help. There's an administration area over here where you can store your possessions.'

He led her over to a place where a tired missionary was trying to settle a dispute between two families. Liu hastily tied her bundle back together and slung it over her torso. She was not going to leave it here, where people were fighting over scraps of cloth. She picked her way through the crowd to find Peng and Kwok already at work, and she immediately joined them, helping them to reset bones or binding

up wounds with the grubby bandages provided.

How could she turn this situation to her advantage? Kuan Yin had trusted her to be able to do it, so there had to be a way. It was while she was binding a sliced arm and listening to a woman's complaints that she realised Morrison was watching her again, and he inspected her work when she was done.

'Not bad,' he remarked.

'And what would a journalist know of binding wounds?' she asked, then cursed her sharpness. She needed this man to get her across to the British compound, where she could find Mrs Grieves and thence the casket's original location. But Morrison smiled at her for the first time, a flashing grin that creased his face.

'As much as a translator, perhaps? I was a doctor, Miss Liu, and it seems I am one again until this siege is over. We'd best get you back before dusk. There tends to be a heavy attack when the sun falls.'

'I think it would be better for us to remain. You do not have enough people with medical skills here, Mr Morrison, and Peng and Kwok will help.'

'They may die.'

'They may die in the streets, or in a gang fight. This way they may save lives.'

'I'll have to clear it with the committees. It's three extra mouths to feed. Come with me, you can help make the case for it.'

They slipped back through the gate and along the eastern barricade, Morrison at the fore. Peng followed, his mouth set as firmly as bones, whilst Kwok stayed to carry on his work with one of the Englishmen to help him. They reached the hastily-built fort halfway down the wall, where they had been helped into this foreign territory, at least according to this new version of Liu's past.

'I had hoped to speak to Mrs Grieves, if she is recovered from Mr Grieves' death,' Liu said, as they paused in the lee of the walls.

'Hah! She may have recovered from that, but not before she died of her wounds. She was injured on the first day of the siege. She passed away yesterday.'

'I am sorry to hear that,' Liu said, but she realised it was more for the loss of the knowledge than the woman. Kuan Yin had been wrong.

Morrison pointed westwards, and Liu saw that the dry bed of a river had been barricaded. The barricades were as haphazard as the other fortifications: wagons and carts drawn across the bed, and the holes plugged with anything that came to hand.

‘This crossing is risky,’ Morrison said. He pointed northwards. ‘The Chinese… the Boxers and the Empress’ troops… are holding that road, and they’ve a good view of the riverbed. But we have to maintain the link, or else the people in Su’s palace would be totally cut off. What the hell does that man think he is doing?’

Morrison broke off from her and started shouting down into the riverbed, where a lone man was making his way across. Then there was the firecracker sound of gunshots, tearing open the air. The dust in the riverbed was spitting up, gritty and yellow, making the view of the crossing hazy. The soldiers around Liu were aiming northwards, but not firing, and she guessed they had limited supplies of ammunition. The man had spun and fallen, the force of bullets throwing him backwards.

Even as the firing continued, Liu saw Morrison run down, a scuttling figure crouching low to the ground. He reached the fallen man, and quickly looked about, judging distances. Then he lifted the man over his shoulder and began a bent, staggering walk to the furthest side.

More bullets crackled in the air, and Liu cried out as Morrison spun and fell. Immediately he tried to rise again, but collapsed, his shirt darkening with blood.

Before the captain could stop her, she ran down into the gully. She saw the patterns in the barricades, the best places to pause and straighten slightly, and she found herself exhilarated by this new awareness. Was this another effect of the witchblood? With Peng dogging her steps, they reached Morrison and the other man; Morrison had blood bubbling on his chest, and his leg was ripped open so that yellow bone poked up, shattered into splinters. The man he’d gone to aid was dead, the back of the head torn away.

‘We’re nearer to the other side,’ Liu said, and Peng silently agreed. They pulled the dead man free and rolled him away, then draped Morrison’s arms about their shoulders. He groaned as they twisted his body so that they could carry it, the ground catching at his ruined leg. They rose into a crouch and ran, pulling him behind them. Liu could feel the air ripping as bullets flew over them.

As they reached the barricaded entrance to the British Legation, soldiers hurried out to help them the last few feet, and they dropped the white man on the floor of the fort. Before the soldiers could react, Peng pulled open Morrison’s shirt and checked the chest-wound.

‘Hey -!’

‘It is all right, sir,’ Liu said to the Englishman who was protesting. ‘Peng is a doctor.’

‘Who the devil are you?’

‘An interpreter, sir. Peng,’ she switched back to Catonese, ‘how is he?’

Peng was pulling the shirt back over the wound, holding it so that the blood seeped through. ‘It is not good. I need wadding to staunch the bleeding, then we must move him to safety to repair the damage.’

The hospital was functional but clearly improvised. It lacked much, yet still had more than the Su’s palace. The doctors whisked Morrison from them, hurrying him into whatever primitive surgery they had created, and a nurse spoke to them loudly and slowly until Liu embarrassed her by replying in fluent English.

After two hours, they were allowed to see Morrison again.

He lay in a cot, his pale face slick with the sheen of the dying. His knee had been bound and splinted, but it was clear that little could be done about the chest-wound. Liu was conscious that her plans were in ruins. Mrs Grieves was dead, so there was no reason to be within the Legations. Her instinctive response to help Morrison meant that she’d lost time against the other woman.

‘Octavia…’ Morrison mumbled, and Liu frowned.

‘Octavia?’ she asked.

Morrison’s left arm, the one not paralysed by the shot through his chest, moved vaguely. Then fell back.

‘There’s a book. A journal. In my jacket. Want Octavia… for her… stupid quest…’

Liu searched the pockets of the man’s abandoned jacket. There were two journals. One was filled with neat diary entries, which became hastily-scrawled notes during the siege. The other contained maps and annotations, and she saw the word “casket”. She folded one hand about it, clutching it to her chest, and took Morrison’s left hand in her other one.

‘I’ll mind it for her,’ she said.

As she walked away, she heard him cough. A wet, gargling cough which told her that his lungs were filling with blood. His voice, tremulous and tired, followed her out of the room.

‘Octavia…’

Chapter Four

Octavia strode back onto the ghost platform, to see Cousin Jaime rising from his game of taroc at her furious arrival.

'Get the others together, biu dai. There'll be no more sitting about.'

The thing she liked about the Red Burial was their loyalty. That they didn't ask questions now, but immediately set about alerting the others. Cousin Jaime looked at her slightly askance.

'What did you call me, Cousin?'

'I said "Cousin", Jaime.'

He shrugged, and swung his arms about as if stretching stiff muscles. Behind him his shadow fell on the platform, its fingers testing the blade of its sword. She nodded towards the engine-plate, where the fires glowed a lazy red and steam trailed out in uncaring wisps, and Jaime winked at her.

Octavia checked that the others were in place. Cousin Thuuraay was standing on the steps at the far end of the lounge car as her shadow idly swung its uyulng, checking and rechecking the wrist-strap.

Octavia was always entertained by the shadows of the Red Burial; whilst their bodies and biodata were reprogrammed and reshaped, the silhouettes remained the same. So Thuuraay's shapeless Han body, with its scraped-back hair, had a lithe aboriginal shadow with heavy dreadlocks in a black halo about its head.

Octavia took the steps up into the carriage and slammed the door of the lounge open. Cousin Ursula started, before rapidly sitting back.

'Oh dear. You're going to be melodramatic, aren't you?'

'Following the protocols is getting me nowhere. We'll be moving the train. Get your analysts in here.'

'We are *not* moving this train without a good reason! We sit tight and wait -'

Cousin Thuuraay's shadow crashed its uyulng into the bone table, the heavy wooden base of it making the predictive blood leap upwards. In the gaslight of the carriage, the embedded shark's-teeth of the weapon were sharp, dark patterns along its edge. Droplets of blood landed on Cousin Ursula's white lace dress, and her face visibly paled.

'Ursula. We will be moving this shrine back just one day, so I can retrieve something important. And then your analysts can try doing some *real* work.'

Cousin Thuuraay's shadow moved to prevent Ursula's raising its own weapon, while Octavia strode over to the speaking-tube. It was an affectation, another part of the plush faux-Tsarist style in which the train was bedecked.

'Cousin Jaime?'

'Here.'

'You've got control of the plate?'

'Yep, she's ready to move. The driver's seeing things our way.'

'Good. Get it stoked up, we're going to need enough energy to go back a day.'

'Got it.'

Generally, Octavia knew, this wouldn't be possible. Re-involving yourself in a Warzone where you'd already intervened, by going back a day and thus interfering in your own history, was a breach of at least two of the Protocols of Linearity. But Compassion had done her job too well. With all routes in and out of the Warzone blocked, the city was effectively sealed off from the rest of linear time. Here and now, the Protocols were flexible.

Hopefully.

After a few minutes, the carriages shuddered around them, the couplings rumbling as they clanked together. The gaslight flicked in its globular shades, and Octavia watched Ursula's shadow test its restrictions.

'This is dangerous, Cousin,' Ursula tried. 'Even without the external restrictions, you can't know what'll happen if you intersect your own mission again. What if you paradox yourself? What if you paradox *us*?'

'You'd best hope that your analysts work well under pressure, Ursula. We are doing it.'

Octavia wasn't greatly concerned by the potential risks. They were here on behalf of *Faction Paradox*; they were supposed to push the limits of mundane, linear time, given the opportunity. She was more worried about the mechanics of the journey. The engine - really just another form of Faction shrine - needed an anchor, a secure place in space and time from which to travel. Without it, the train could become lost forever. The ghost station should have been enough, but there was a chance that the energy binding the city might snap the anchorage.

The screens buzzed into life, a horizontal band of black drifting up and down across noise before the signals blinked into focus. The navigator, who clearly didn't care who was supplying the orders as

long as he got to play with the train, checked the readouts on the various navigational displays in front of him. Octavia noticed he had tip implants, gold glimmering in the swirls of his fingerprints, to increase his control and manipulation of the instruments.

'We've got enough power, full steam,' he reported. 'But the pistons can't push the flywheels. There's too much resistance.'

Octavia, her shadow still looming over Ursula's, leant to look over the navigator's shoulder. His gold-flecked fingers tapped on the screen until a web of fine structured lines overlaid the organic flux of the timestream, as if a spider had been particularly sober. He traced a line.

'It's these that are the problem. Never felt such well-defined barriers. Spatially, we're good to go. Temporally? We're screwed. Every angle, every slip or slide into other angles, is covered. This is tight.'

'Is all the engine power going towards the temporal shafts?'

'All but the usual shields and the anchor.'

The train was shuddering, so that every loose object shook and the blood still on the shoulder-blade jumped and danced into new patterns.

'All right, ease off,' Octavia said. 'Redirect the power from the timeship bafflers. There's only one timeship in the area, and she already knows we're here.'

'But -'

'It'll give us an extra boost. Do it, then full steam ahead.'

There was a pause, a juddering as the engines slowed a little, and then the carriages began a vibration deep in their bones.

'We're not going to make it,' Ursula offered, in drawing-room tones. Octavia ignored her.

'Now!' she commanded, and the Little Brother's fingers gilded a switch.

The glass windows quivered beyond the drawn velvet, and the wood shook. Those not tied down took a grip on the fixed furniture.

'Oh, Grandfather…' Cousin Thuuraay muttered, starting a litany in her natural tongue. Octavia braced herself as a mirror smashed from the wall, sour shards flying up to cut at them. The carriage tilted at a heavy angle, poised as if a breath could fell it, and then crashed back onto the tracks.

Everything went quiet. There was a long moment of fear, as they braced themselves for a shock that never came, before a collective

sigh escaped them.

‘Well,’ the Little Brother on the controls said, as Octavia huffed her hair from her eyes, ‘the spirits must like you. We’re through.’

Octavia charged Thuuraay with the task of controlling the lounge car. Cousin Jaime had the plate and should have been able to hold the power under their control, but the less risk of being suddenly stranded, the better. She jumped from the top of the steps onto the ghost platform and made her way back into the city. It was the morning of the 16th again, the night after Octavia’s ritual had sent her into the Forbidden City.

An hour later she was slipping into the British Legation. After a few minutes of searching she spotted Miss Munroe, sloe-eyed and fatigue-heavy from her vigil over the dead Mrs Grieves, and caught at her elbow.

‘Morrison. Have you seen Morrison this morning, Miss Munroe?’

‘Octavia! I was worried for you when you did not return last night. And now you greet me with -’

‘Miss Munroe, Dr Morrison and I have behaved with all due propriety. However, I do need to speak to him most urgently.’

‘He is up at the gatehouse. They are planning to check the Su’s defences this afternoon.’

Octavia released her, and would have turned away, but Miss Munroe caught at her hand.

‘Mrs Grieves will be buried this afternoon, if there is respite from the firing, and she has no relatives to see her into the ground. Will you attend?’

Octavia didn’t blink. She disliked funerals, disliked the smack of earth onto wood. Her sister had been buried on a wet day and, as the rain had spat mud up onto their clothes, the preacher had spoken of her body rising again come Judgement. Octavia had lain awake that night, in her suddenly-spacious bed, imagining her sister in the earth. The rain drumming on the soil as it did on the slate roofs, waking the worms with its rhythm. The worms that would be eating Effie’s flesh as the disease had eaten her lungs. Rising again but not whole or reborn, coughing up not blood but mud. It was that shuddering fear which, she knew, had taken her down the first steps towards the Faction. Her initiation, the ritual before the ghost of a sabre had been sewn to her shadow, had involved earth and wood and tiny blind creatures crawling over her skin. She had beaten her hands bloody in her hatred of it, but she had passed.

‘No,’ she said now, ‘I am a poor mourner.’

She found Morrison in the improvised fort, sat talking to a couple of marines as the bullets cracked into the sandbags. He was laughing at something, his head thrown back. He was so alive that Octavia's heart stopped up with unexpected pain, a delayed and bruising grief at his future death.

'Morning, Miss Octavia,' the captain said, tipping her a swift salute. 'I'd get that head down if you want to keep it, miss.'

She dropped next to Morrison, and was surprised by his sudden stillness. He was watching her hands, avoiding her gaze by staring at the hardened black blood beneath her nails.

'Did you find it? Whatever was so important?' he asked.

She kept her gaze ahead, avoiding his annoyed eyes. She wondered that he had called for her on his deathbed.

'It is half-caught.'

'So here you are again, like the bad penny that can never be lost.'

She scuffed her boot in the dust.

'Miss Munroe tells me you are going across to the Su.'

'And then to Mrs Grieves' laying to rest. Mao - remember Mao? - he was thrown over the Tartar wall this morning with no-one to care.'

'Will one of the soldiers be going with you?' she asked. She felt his fingers dance at the edge of her hand, as if fascinated but repulsed.

'Octavia? Is there something you know? Some future thing you're trying to tell me?'

She remained silent. The firing from the north, from the attackers firing down the dry river bed towards the barricades of carts and wagons, was petering out. Morrison looked up at the tops of the sandbags.

'Must be lunchtime.' He stood and she rose with him, her hand briefly grabbing at his before he slid it away from her. He was picking up a small pack, bulging with medical supplies, when he paused to look along the barricade.

'Hey, you! Get your bloody head *down*!' he yelled, as the bullets started up. Fat slugs tore through the air and she saw, with sudden clarity, what was about to happen. Morrison was already discarding the pack and starting out from the fort, so she grabbed at his arm.

'George -'

He pulled free angrily, and slid down the steep incline from the gatehouse to the dead riverbed. The barricades were flimsy to Octavia's eyes, nothing more than old carts and hastily-gathered

wood. Even primitive bullets could rip through it, as easily as they could rip through flesh. Morrison was crouching low as he ran out, and Octavia felt a sense of dread gathering beneath her breastbone.

But one of the marines was just ahead of Morrison now, and she watched as the man jerked and fell forward onto the handle of a cart. Morrison reached him seconds later, pulling him down to the bed of the river and checking him over. Neither the marine nor the other fallen man were moving.

Morrison looked each way, judging the distances. He took a few steps back, towards the gateway. Then his leg crumpled underneath him.

Octavia didn't feel as if she were running, but suddenly she was by his side. Only his leg was wounded, the bullet smashing through muscle, fat and cartilage. She hastily bound it with one of her silk scarves, the blood turning the black silk dull, and then got his arm about her shoulder. Had she not stopped him, he would have been hit as the Marine had been.

'Octavia -'

She hefted him up and staggered into a run, the pain forcing him to stop his objections. His injured leg trailed and he stumbled along on the other. Marines and volunteers were reaching for them, pulling them back up from the riverbed and hauling them into the relative safety of the gatehouse.

'You… you bloody witch… you killed that man,' Morrison muttered.

'He's in a lot of pain,' she told the volunteers, widening her eyes to look worried, and they hurried to find a stretcher and carry Morrison to the hospital.

'You damned witch…' he said again, but his left hand clutched at hers the whole way to the operating room.

When he came round, doped up on opiates and muzzy with gruff fondness, he briefly squeezed her fingers and then put her hand to one side. When she asked, he gave her Grieves' journal.

About halfway along the route back to the ghost station, slipping from shadowed doorway to shuttered gates, Octavia turned her thoughts back to her work. She had a physical record of the location of the White Pyramid. It was something which had eluded her in a year of scouring all the resources of the Stacks and the Victoria Tower archives. Knowing that a timeship had to be involved in some way, the paucity of information was easily explained. That the journal existed, its material covers rough on her palms, had to be an

oversight. Something overlooked or thought safely-destroyed. Her own presence here, and the retro-annulling of it which would occur once she was done, might have been the very thing that had obscured it.

As she approached the train, it gave a brief whistle. Cousin Jaime still had the plate, then. The atmosphere in the lounge car was tense and weary, as if those within had become bored with their roles. The navigator and one of the Red Burial were comparing bio-enhancements. A couple of analysts sat waiting for her, running abstract notions through their heads and - in the case of Cousin Admetus - maniacally scratching an ear. Ursula was pouting, her artificially-bee-stung lips quivering, but everyone was ignoring her except Cousin Thuuraay's patiently-waiting shadow. Someone had cleaned the blood from the giant shoulder-blade table.

'Right,' Octavia said, dropping her bag. 'I've got the spatial co-ordinates, or will have as soon as I read this journal. And I've got this.'

She noted Ursula's repressed twitch of surprise as she reached inside her bag and brought out her half of the casket. The ace she'd kept up her sleeve. The jade was familiar on her palms, and its weight was a friend. Carefully, twisting it in her hands till it rested upright, she set it down in front of the analysts. Her fingertips lingered on the carving of a dragon.

'This will give us the temporal co-ordinates.'

Cousin Admetus poked at the half-casket cautiously, as if expecting it to trick him. The other analyst, Samuel, reached for the journal but Octavia kept her hand on it. There were plush velvet chairs along one side of the carriage, their naps worn bare on the edges, and she sank back into one. She let her head flip back briefly and closed her eyes, allowing the cognition enhancers to activate within her corneas. Then she sat up and began to read the journal.

Unlike some of the Cousins, Octavia had never been interested in the bio-technological developments made in the workshops, only allowing a few basic necessities into her. The eidetic memory cache sped up preparations for work in the field, and the cognition enhancers had been fitted when she'd realised she'd been withdrawing into the research. They saved her brain from the need to process the visual markers on the page, instead grabbing words wholesale, tagging them and filing them.

As she absorbed Grieves' journal, her eyes kept drawing back to the casket. In the gaslight, the precious stone was warmer. Its highlights were soft and its shadows welcoming. She wanted to reach out, keep it in contact with herself. It was hers.

When she recovered the rest of it, she would have to surrender it.

Personal possessions weren't meaningful in the Eleven-Day Empire. Totemic knives were all very well, but a fondness for private meanings - for memory-objects - was felt to indicate a lack of dedication. Octavia owned nothing of Anastasia's.

'Navigator? Have you got a topographical map?'

She rose to stand by his shoulder again. The navigator's fingertips glistened as he called up images onto the screens. Contour-lines showed the hills and valleys, the mountains and plains. Another tap of his finger and water rolled over the landscape. The contours and patterns shifted, showing the drift of time. Octavia directed him towards the north-west deserts, out where lakes slowly evaporated to leave the bones of settlements and where prayer-flags sang to the winds.

'Overlay the roads and trails for our current time-period,' she said, and black lines ran across the screen. Occasionally they pooled and formed dark squares, to indicate villages and towns. To the north, the silken road divided to run about the northern and southern edges of a desert before rejoining in the west, where the Himalaya rose.

'There?' she said. The area was blank. Not a total absence, as any fool could see an entirely erased area, but a smudge; as if a crease in a map were hiding a vital symbol.

'That's good,' said Cousin Samuel, 'but we're not going to get temporal co-ordinates out of this.'

He tossed the casket towards Octavia, and she dropped the journal so that she could wrap both hands around it. She saw Ursula twist in her chair, but Thuuraay was already slamming her palm into the Homeworlder's chest, shoving her back. Her shadow-weapon swung, blocking Ursula's own.

Octavia waited, her eyes holding Ursula's, until the other woman sat back. Then she straightened and let her shadow dart forward. The sabre struck a glancing blow, the edge cutting Cousin Samuel's cheek.

'That's a mark against you, Cousin,' Octavia said. 'Cousin Admetus?'

He arched his back into a shrug. 'The casket is giving us wildly conflicting data. It's either exceptionally old, or made moments ago.'

'How exceptionally old?'

'Pre-universe? I did say wildly conflicting.'

It fit with her own perception of it from the séance: a messy tangle of unlikely data, threads unravelling and re-knotting faster than they could be tracked.

'Is it witchblood?'

Admetus shrugged again. ‘Perhaps, but it’s not like any I’ve seen before.’

‘Could you resolve it with better resources?’

The Cousin looked about the train, as if marvelling that there could be more useful resources than this travelling sideshow of a Faction shrine. ‘Doubt it. I’d advise you to drop the thing, but somehow I think you’re not going to go for that suggestion, so try charging up the engines and get flyboy there to aim at a random time in the right location.’

‘Is that risky?’

Cousin Admetus grinned, revealing needle-sharp teeth. ‘Isn’t that what we signed up for?’

The carriage was rumbling and roaring, shivering beneath their feet. She had set Cousin Baudelaire down at the ghost station to wait for Prester John. If Octavia failed, at least someone could tell him what had become of his engine.

‘This really is -’ Cousin Ursula began.

‘Will you shut her *up*, Thuuraay?’ Octavia asked. She was still resting one hand on the half-casket. It was wired into the navigation desk, where a space had been hastily cleared and an interface had been hacked together. Golden filaments had been attached, stretching from tiny dot-shaped pads on the jade to patched-in terminals nestling in the walnut veneer.

Octavia heard the crack of Thuuraay’s hand hitting Ursula’s temple, and the woman fell silent. The navigator glanced up at Octavia and grinned.

‘Here goes!’

The rattling was different this time. Underlying the shaking and quaking of the train was the clatterer-clack of the rimmed metal wheels on the ghost-track, taking a train-line that hadn’t been built yet to the north and west of the country. Octavia braced herself as the navigator patched in the temporal data.

The carriage began to sway, a harsh thunking sound suggesting points being crossed at speed. There was the sensation of immense force pushing against them, the pressure rising in their eardrums as if in a tunnel deep underground. Octavia’s teeth jarred within her mouth and she curled her tongue protectively away from them. She felt as if there were something else with her here, something extra. As if she might turn about to see someone familiar watching her.

Then they were tilting. There was a brief moment of stillness,

weightlessness. The carriage derailed.

It crashed onto its side, the windows shattering. Wood crumpled and tore itself free as it continued along the ghost-track, still on its side. Octavia was pressed against the controls, the casket jammed into her belly. The navigator was screaming, and she realised that his arm had been torn back through a shattered screen, and was being pulled along underneath the train. The gaslight failed.

All she could hear was shrieking. The navigator, his eyes frozen wide, was still yelling as his arm was destroyed. The metal and wood were ripping themselves apart, and beyond… beyond the damaged carriage was time. It was tearing at them, dismantling their vehicle so that soon it would burn through their blood and their bones till they were gone. Time had caught up with them.

Octavia screamed.

Chapter Five

Liu had found it surprisingly easy to slip over the eastern edge of the besieged quarter. She drifted east and north, away from the familiar areas. This part of the city was dense with temples, and she glimpsed golden Buddhas alive in the lantern light, beyond heavy gates. The ponderous smell of incense almost masked the smell of drifting smoke from further west. Chimes sang in hidden courtyards, and she glimpsed prayer-wheels and flags spinning and fluttering slowly. Other areas, fantastically painted, sang to Daoist chants and prayers. Hundreds of thousands of people were invoking the gods tonight, supplicating themselves for protection against the Boxers' spiritual prowess, or perhaps against the foreign forces' revenge when they arrived.

She took streets and lanes at random, selecting them based on what felt most natural. She was still unsure about the ideas Kuan Yin had implanted in her mind, and was watching them germinate with caution. Kuan Yin had suggested, among the many other instructions which had been so urgently conveyed, that Liu should trust to her instincts and allow the irrational space in her mind. It went against the last few years of thought, went against all that she had so often argued for back in the Society for Self-Strengthening in Guangzhou, and yet she found it easy. Part of her railed against it, but another part - smaller and timorous - told her that she must not be as rigid in her thoughts as the Qing, else she was no better than those she sought to overthrow.

She found a small, neglected courtyard, nothing but a disused space between three temples, and entered it. She needed time to meditate and this area, with the faint whispers of prayers and chimes, seemed forgotten and undisturbed. She sank to the ground. Carefully, she set her bundle of possessions in front of her and unwrapped it. The jade casket nestled within her old clothes, green *against* the pink. *Half* the casket, she reminded herself, letting her fingers trail over the locking stubs along one side. It felt good on her skin, as if she had always been meant to hold it. She left one hand trailing over the carvings on its sides as she opened the cloth-bound journal.

She read Grieves' account of the finding of the Great Pyramid, dry and pedantic, and fit it together with Mao's version. Then she tried reading the journal a new way.

'Na mo ho la da nu do la ye ye…' she began.

The sand tastes different here, blown into her mouth by winds coursing

down from the farthest western mountains. It is not the black sand of the Gobi which choked her in Beijing, but the red dust of the Taklamakan. Workmen are digging, excavating at the base of the Great Pyramid. Its mass soars over her, vibrating with a thick layer of threads, threads that she can follow. There is something wrong, though. It is as if someone is digging into her past, pulling it apart mindlessly. She gasps and releases the casket and journal.

She blinked as the tiny courtyard sprung up again about her. Standing before her, framed by the red-painted gateway to the courtyard, stood the ghost-woman. The impossible wind was coiling the woman's long black hair up so that her face was obscured. Her hand, slim with gleaming nails, raised and beckoned. Liu recalled Octavia's comment that she had seen a ghost too, and that she had thought it was Kuan Yin. Even with the face hidden, Liu knew that Octavia was wrong; this was another woman.

Tendrils of time swirled about her, speaking to Liu of age and great weariness. A longing for the casket which had been taken from her. This was a spirit, and she realised now that it was the spirit of the Pyramid's occupant.

Liu hurriedly wrapped her old clothes about the half-casket, and stood. The spirit beckoned again and turned away. Picking up her possessions, Liu followed.

The gunboat was being pushed about by the defences. It lurched from side to side, from sidereal to solar, waves of time sweeping over its decks. Prester John was rather glad he'd taken a post-industrial ship for this job. He'd wandered through the fleet, considering the entertaining possibilities of the Chinese junk or the pirate galleon, both of which would have looked superb as they swooped out of the timestream and into the sky above Beijing in 1900. He always liked to arrive with style. He liked to do *everything* with style.

Tall and lithe, with a worn Mediterranean face and an often feral grin, Prester John habitually wore long cloaks or coats; he enjoyed the way the sweeping skirts would disrupt things as he passed, leaving behind a trail of calculated carelessness. His black, salt-peppered hair was long as well, falling in waves to his collar. Hawk-eyes glared from beneath thick, dark brows. When he frowned, lesser members of the Faction's Military Wing could be seen to quiver, and even some of his equals didn't like to cross him on a bad day.

'Father?'

He tried to ignore the shout. Even in the cramped conditions of the WW2 corvette's bridge, he could maintain an aloof distance. There

was little style or comfort here, but at least the ship's time-tempered metal could withstand the forces that were pushing it back; the pretty wooden ships would have been so much mulch by now, rotten wood scattered across forest floors as if it had never been fashioned into a weapon of the War. Even now the metal sang, whispering its longing to be molten, to be tangled into the earth again or a pure element within the heart of a star. The barriers they were pushing against were good, perhaps even Homeworld, and he was starting to wonder if his old Tsarist train and his two favourite Cousins would still be in the city if he *did* get through.

'Father…?'

Cousin Pendek was panicking. Prester John wasn't surprised. These weren't his crack team, after all. These were a hastily-cobbled-together bunch of paper-pushers and bottom-feeders who were trying to retrieve the crack team from a locked-down Warzone. Another shock wrenched the ship backwards, the metal gurgling. The viewing-screens were flooding the bridge with the burning blood-glare of the city. Red lights were popping up on all the panels, visible only as brighter points in the chaos. Someone somewhere was babbling a catechism to one of the Grandfather's Four Lieutenants. For a moment, some of the metal to the fore of the ship glistened and ran. Prester John scowled at Pendek.

'Ease off, Cousin. We're wasting our energy just battering at the damn place. Get those red lights dealt with, tell Ingerson to stop bloody bothering the ancestors and power up the weapons battery. We're breaking out the metaphorical big guns. The *literal* metaphorical big guns.'

Octavia was breathing raggedly through her mouth. The train had stopped its long slide now, and lay crumpled on the ghost-tracks. The emergency circuits had cut in as the integrity of the carriage had been breached, and the holes where windows had broken or the wall had ripped away were sealed. Autumnal leaves, red and orange, still fluttered in the vibrating air where the wood had regressed to trees and the trees had shed their foliage. A corner of a screen had bubbled back into sand.

The navigator was leaning against the curved roof which had become the side of the lounge. His knees were drawn up tight to his chest, and he cradled his withered and smashed arm to his breastbone with his still-youthful other arm. Octavia could see trails of silver tears on his face. It was true that losing an arm had a certain cultural cache in the Faction, but it was of little comfort to someone whose life was in his hands. The damaged arm was liver-spotted, the fingers cramped

into heavy knots of arthritis; he was lucky the seals had kicked in when they had. Octavia gave him a smile as she caught his eye. She raised herself up, pulling the casket free of its twisted cable.

'Don't worry. When we get back to the Eleven-Day Empire, they'll be able to -'

'You mean "if",' he said, and closed his eyes to her.

Someone began a slow clap behind her, and Octavia turned to find Ursula standing over Thuuraay. The hem of her white dress was black with blood, and her shadow was still kicking the body of the younger Cousin. Octavia rolled her aching shoulder to loosen it. Her healing palm itched, and she clenched it as she spoke.

'We're going on.'

'Hah! Look about you, *girl*. This train isn't going anywhere. We're stable, but we're overstretched. We need all our resources to hold us together until John can trace us. *If* John tries to trace us. You'd better hope Cousin Baudelaire survives the Boxers.'

Octavia didn't want to admit that Ursula might be right, but the other Cousin wasn't trying to prove Octavia wrong this time, just stating the facts. At least one of the Red Burial was dead, and would soon slip out of existence. The navigator was wounded and in shock, unlikely to react well to a request to move the train again.

'The anchor held?' she asked.

'It held. Now the emergency seals have stabilised, it'll be secure.'

Octavia noticed that the huge tabletop had been flung over in the crash. The mammoth-bone had survived intact, but Ursula's chair was shattered. The curtains on the uppermost side of the carriage hung down in red sheets. In one damaged corner, cotton-plants budded, balls of raw fluff white against the green wood of the equally-regressed walnut tree. Cocheneals crawled about, restored from the dye. Octavia's fingers caressed the stubby end of the casket again.

'*I'll* be going on, then.'

Ursula stared at her. 'You don't mean that.'

Octavia picked her way over the ruined consoles, avoiding the hissing screens, and began to drag one of the overturned velvet chairs towards the door to the passageway.

'The passageway's stable?'

'Yes, but -'

'Good, we'll use it like an airlock. The emergency seal will keep you and the others safe.'

Ursula finally moved then, staggering over the remains of the room to Octavia's side. Not all of the blood on her skirts was others', Octavia realised. A large rip down one side revealed a torn thigh, perhaps from the broken bone-shards of the chair.

'You're mad. No-one would go out unprotected. You'll be ripped apart.'

'I'll use the train as an anchor.'

'It won't be enough -'

'Are you going to help me reach that door, or just stand there being contrary? The train is stable, you're just going to be sitting here waiting for retrieval. And I'll be gone. You lose nothing by letting me go except my presence here.'

Ursula held her eyes for a long moment. It was an hard, appraising look, with just a hint of approval in it.

'You're an insane witch,' she said, as she pushed the old chair into place and offered Octavia a leg-up. 'Now get off my train.'

Liu approached the ruined building, led by the fluttering clothes of the spirit. Sometimes she thought there wasn't even a body inside all that white silk, just an empty shell. It was only when she heard the shouts of soldiers, and the gunfire, that she realised she'd drawn close to the Legations again and that the ghost of a building into which the spirit drifted was the Hanlin Yuan.

She hadn't seen it since the fire. She had dizzying memories of being carried out by a soldier, his headband indicating the phoenix. No, two of them. She hadn't seen any other soldiers like them in all her traverses across the city. She still had no idea why they had intervened to save her.

The central courtyards are clogged with destruction now. In the hot burning sky, the collapsed building is grey and black. The spirit-figure is standing near a black pool, looking skywards. Liu realises her hand has unconsciously slid into her bundle and is warm on the jade, and she is seeing again. The building about her hums with centuries of thought and study, whilst flames crackle without heat and lights roar past in streams of red and white. She hasn't chanted, so why is this happening?

She is touching the casket. No, it is touching her. It is demanding that she hold it, urging the contact and through it… through it she sees red desert storms and billowing clouds of smoke. For a moment there is a black onyx mirror, held to reflect the future and then - at last - she glimpses the spirit-woman's face.

It is her own.

High above the city a grey steel dragon, fury in its red eyes and black heart, roars and plunges towards her. The ghost is reaching for her, and Liu's free hand rises to meet it. She expects cold, translucent skin and is surprised that it is warm and firm. The dragon's breath is stealing hers, hiding her vision in huge clouds which scud across the sky. The wind which whips at the ghost's robes catches at Liu, and she feels it tug and pull at her clothes, at her skin, at her very self. She can no longer feel the ground.

The steam dissipated like morning mist, and Liu looked about herself in confusion. Where before there had been the black shadows of the destroyed Hanlin Yuan, and the humid air of Beijing, now she stood in the wide bowl of a baking valley. Heat sang from the red, dusty soil beneath her soles, and her face tightened as the sun dried her sweat-dampened skin. The sky was high and wide, stretched taunt between the red hills which surrounded the plain. In the middle rose a half-built burial-mound, with the sounds of activity ringing faintly in the air.

Before her, warmly-lit by the setting sun and holding half of the jade casket to her chest, stood an equally confused Octavia.

Chapter Six

‘Oh,’ Octavia spoke first, ‘you again.’

The western woman was circling Liu. Moving so that her long shadow, cast by the low, rich sun, would fall on her opponent. In the empty landscape, Liu could see its weapon clearly: the curving outline of a sabre. She began to take a series of swaying steps to keep beyond its reach. As she moved, she tightened the knot in her bundle, watching Octavia’s eyes dart to the glimpse of jade.

‘I wondered if you were Compassion’s agent in this,’ Octavia said. ‘They always like to have a Homeworlder or a human to do their bidding.’

A flash of green mineral caught Liu’s attention, as Octavia slipped her own half of the casket into a bag slung low across her chest. Liu quickly raised her eyes to watch those of the other woman. Octavia’s irises glowed hazel, green flecked with gold and brown, and held as still as her body.

Liu relaxed, let each muscle soften as she raised one leg into the heron pose, to tempt a blow whilst she was apparently off-balance. She stepped back as Octavia’s shadow lunged, turning and spinning on her heel to bring a swinging roundhouse to the woman’s head. Octavia checked her thrust, and raised an arm to block the blow. They both dropped back and started sidling again.

‘You are good,’ the westerner offered, without inflection. She was concealing her intentions vocally as well as physically. Liu nodded in acknowledgement.

‘Thank you. I am but a lowly student.’

‘When did you learn to hitch-hike? You could have killed us both.’

Octavia feinted as Liu frowned in confusion, her shadow’s sabre swinging in a low arc as her upper body threw an upper cut. Liu sprung into the air, jack-knifing before stamping on Octavia’s fist. They crashed to the ground, briefly, and rolled apart.

‘I do not know what you mean,’ Liu replied.

Octavia shrugged. ‘It’s a poor show when a translator can’t understand.’

She lunged again, and the fight began in earnest.

Ingerson had shut up, with the promise of a gun battery to play with. Pendek had found something to do which, if not making him

useful, at least kept him out of Prester John's way. John himself was quietly checking the life-support options. The ship was still shuddering, the metal hull hot to touch. A rivet had popped, turning into a ball of molten steel in mid-air before falling to the floor as a lump of ore. The emergency seals had thumped into action, creating a web of filaments to hold time back from the tiny hole in the hull. Still, integrity had been breached; it could only be a matter of time before the whole collapsed, and Prester John wanted to be ready.

'How are the metaphorical big guns?' he called down to Ingerson.

'Like apple blossom awaiting -'

'Don't get cute, Ingerson.'

'Ready, sir.'

The main problem he saw was that there was no clear target. Something was creating the impregnable network of lines about the city. Based on what he recalled of his own time in China, when he'd been a Cousin intent on pulling off stunts and prone to impersonating great explorers, it could have been the people themselves creating the web. He remembered a rather fine evening sipping rice-wine on the steps of a temple and watching two monks practising their skills. The master, who'd seen Prester John as a Daoist spirit-warrior, had explained how each person could supplement their physical skills with the correct application of the chi until a punch from just an inch away could hurl an opponent across the practise square. If someone were channelling that energy now, controlling and guiding it to create the barrier, then he needed to find the focal-point.

Or just try hitting the city at random.

'Okay, get the guns loaded and fire at -'

'Father!'

'What *now*, Pendek?'

'The lines are shifting.'

John looked at a readout and saw that the energy was indeed shifting, as if diverting about a series of straight walls. Each contour slid out towards a different compass-point, wavering. There was a hole in the barrier.

'It looks like a trap, boys. Or an invite. Let's see who the spider is and whether they offer a good tea.'

The gunboat crashed into the lake at the Summer Palace, just outside the western city walls. The ripples it sent out shook the foundations of the Dowager Empress' marble boat, and mirrors within it speckled with sudden age. Two Little Brothers hurried to secure

mooring-lines to the marble dock, whilst four others leapt ashore to guard the bank.

'Sébastian? You're in charge while I'm ashore. Try not to touch anything. And I'm leaving you because you're not trigger-happy, try to remember that. Ingerson, Pendek? You're with me.'

He led the way out of the gardens with ten Little Brothers at his back, armed with guns and swords, and strode through the streets. Most were empty of people. They passed an alley where bodies lay in the gullies to the side; the dead men had been bound, their ears and noses cut off and their eyes gouged out. Beside them lay women and children, hacked up and bundled together like butchers' scraps. A whip-thin dog started as John and Ingerson passed, pulling its bloodied snout free and slinking away to watch them from beneath an overturned cart.

'Gods, but it smells like a charnel-house,' John said, finding a handkerchief to hold to his nose and mouth. Pendek was repeatedly consulting a handheld that made annoying noises. His directions seemed based solely on what was on the screen, rather than the real streets before them. Prester John pulled it from his hands.

'Where's the train station? The one that wasn't built in the 1890s? And where are we? Right, we'll try following our noses and hopefully that way they won't be cut off.'

Near the Yung Ting Men, they encountered a rag-tag mob dressed in filthy clothes and with harsh, twisted faces. The people carried pikes with curved and serrated blades, or three prongs like a pitchfork. Prester John shouted a few orders to the Little Brothers, then stood still. He clasped his hands behind his back and smiled as the mob was decimated by his ten men. He spun occasionally, stepping aside from a grappling fight, and the remaining fighters began to dissipate.

'Well, can't say much for them or their rituals,' said John, and walked out to the station.

Cousin Baudelaire was waiting on the platform, dressed in black fustian with blood across her brow and a velvet ribbon tying back her hair. The ghost station was littered with bodies of Chinese.

'Father!' she greeted him happily. 'We've held the station all right.'

'So I see. Now…where's my train?'

Xu didn't know what to do. His life was built on etiquette, on formality and ritual, and now those rules were lost to him. Soldiers had come, smashing open the gates and overturning his house. When he had cried out, Meng had stepped forward with puffed-out pride and

demanded the whereabouts of Liu. The Commander's cheek was bruised and scratched, a visible loss of face.

When Xu had refused to give up his disinherited neice, he had been thrown out of his own home and forced to watch it burn with his mo - and his servants - inside. Yet Meng had let him live with the shame.

Aimlessly wandering in the ruins in the south-west of the city, shying away from the gunfire and smell of cordite to the east, he had thought that he had seen a ghost. There had been a trail of white silk, pure and brilliantly clear against the glowering reds. He'd seen long, straight, black hair falling about a face which, as it had turned briefly towards him, had seemed to be filled with Liu's features. Had he done this? Destroyed his niece so that she was trapped in spirit form, unable to leave this world? Did it mean that Meng had found her? It was easy to dismiss her in his head, expel her from the family, but in his heart he still wished to have her close. Her and An Nuo.

He dare not seek his son. It was doubtful that An Nuo would welcome his estranged father, and besides, Xu suspected that Meng would have set someone to shadow him in case he led them to Liu. He stopped in the street at that thought; no matter were he went, he might be bringing violence and death.

He was at the base of a set of steps, their centres worn into smooth curves by the passage of millions of feet. Looking up he saw heavy iron gates and, beyond, a statue of She Who Hears the Cries of the World. He took one hesitant step towards it, then noticed monks in dark robes, watching him from the shadows.

'Please… I seek sanctuary,' he pleaded, falling on his knees.

John had set the Little Brothers to guard the station against further attack. Cousin Bauderlaire had filled him in on events since communications had been lost. He couldn't say he was surprised that Cousins Octavia and Ursula hadn't bonded well. Octavia hadn't worked well with *anyone* since that unfortunate business with the breakaway Republic. She'd become a loner in a nation of loners. It was hard to tell, in a culture which favoured black clothes and sour faces, but he'd suspected that she was in mourning for her lost other half. He still had memories of seeing them on the battlefield, somewhere near Trebrinska, back-to-back. Octavia in her Victorian black, Anastasia in the white Edwardian lace dress she'd eventually died in. The working-class lass from the tenement slums of Edinburgh and a member of the Russian aristocracy. They'd been unstoppable.

Ursula had the same highborn glamour, but she came with an extra veneer of superiority which was bound to have riled Octavia. He'd

hoped that this was what she needed, that the abrasion would reawaken his favourite little fighter.

The War in Heaven had become a war of sieges, the Faction finding itself manoeuvred into tighter and tighter corners, so bound up in research and ritual that within a decade it might not have any real fighting capability at all. He wanted - *needed* - his Octavia back. He didn't give a damn about her fortune-and-glory quest.

'Father, we've got a trace!' Pendek shouted over.

They'd organised a tracking base at the ghost station, programming it to search for the train, Ursula or Octavia. It was running through googolplexes of possible futures, extrapolated from what Cousin Bauderlaire had reported. Pendek was peering into a scope and fiddling with readout dials.

'Who and where? And when?' Prester John asked.

'Oh.' Pendek slumped back into the wicker garden-chair which had been pressed into service. 'It's just Octavia.'

Prester John gave his head a light but angry swipe. 'She's a First Cousin, Pendek, and one whose littlest toe has seen more action than your arse can dream of. Where and when is she?'

'She's here, Father. Well, not geographically *here* here, but temporally here here. There's something wrong with her biodata, though. I mean, more wrong than the usual.'

'Like what?'

'Like there's more of her, mass-wise, but it's all clustered together. It almost looks like a doppel effect, but that would raise all kinds of problems about which one of her to retrieve. Father.'

'That stupid little tracker; can you get the trace into it?'

'Yes, although -'

'Good.'

He suspected it was what he liked about Ursula and Octavia; in their different ways, both of them knew what they wanted and went after it. The hastily-reprogrammed handheld beeped at him until he found a way to set it to vibrate, and he stuffed it into the pocket of his coat.

'You keep looking for Ursula and the train. I'd rather like that shrine back. And her, of course.'

He'd been in the capital a few times before; once to some vast sprawling metropolis of the twenty-second century, when the Chinese Middle Kingdom finally had control of all that lay between the celestial heavens and the underworlds of hell. The early colony ships

had been heading out then, planning to bring new worlds into the Kingdom's sphere of influence and leave Earth behind. He'd last spent some time in Beijing a millennium earlier, as the Tartar city walls had been constructed. Within had been a transitional culture, trying to adjust from the nomadic system of rule within yurts of felt and fur to a static world of solid permanence. Looking about now, as he strode confidently through the haunted streets, he thought they must have adapted too well. The Khan who had settled here, built this city, had been radical. He had created a new system of governance for his nomads, founded an empire. It didn't appear to have changed in the eight centuries since.

The streets were abandoned. Fires still raged, and in the distance he could hear the chanting of mobs demanding blood. The violence about the besieged Legations attracted him, and the handheld was sending him towards it. He rather wished he'd bothered to disguise himself now.

There were fresh ruins here, knowledge sacrificed to chaos. To the southern end, men in uniform scurried and shouted. Quick fire occasionally sounded from a gun. A one-incher, he guessed, from its echoing reports. Here, where he stood, the ruins were in shadow. Blackened wood and crisp parchment crackled beneath his feet, so that he began to move more cautiously. The handheld in his pocket was purring excitedly. He switched it off and stopped still, letting his own senses work on the question of why he stood here.

As he waited, he caught glimpses of a figure in the corner of his eyes. Every time he turned his gaze fully towards it, it slipped away. He thought there was a sound with it, a quiet, half-caught crying. The hair on his forearms tingled and rose, the sensation spreading up his nerves and into his scalp.

Yes. There was a figure crouching in the ruins opposite him. She wore long, translucent robes, and her pale, thin hands emerged from the wide sleeves like a child's. She had a piece of material binding her hand, soaked red with blood, and was apparently picking over the green shards at her feet. Except, he realised, her insubstantial hands weren't moving the objects at all but slipping through them as if she weren't really there. A faint hint of a breeze brought her wailing voice to him.

'Where is it? It must be here. Where is the casket? Mine. Mine. Time. Mine.'

He recognised the voice and strangled his urge to call out. She was turning anyway, this ghost-woman, and he saw the face beneath the fall of pale hair. She was out of synchronisation, drifting half in this

world, and he had no way to bring her back.

This was Octavia's ghost. She was lost to them.

They were pausing for breath, and the thin air made Octavia wonder how high up they were. She recognised the plain from Grieves' sketches. The land was the same, the wide, pale valley rising to the red mountains with their shadowy vertical crevasses, but the man-made structures were different. The burial mound was still under construction, caged by bamboo scaffolding, and small, round tents dotted the area around it. So, they'd come back to the time when the casket had been entombed. A chance to get it whole.

If she could beat Liu.

'The sun touches the horizon and the moon is not yet risen,' Liu said now, in her carefully-accented English. 'What will you do when you lose the advantage of your shadow?'

Octavia glanced westwards. The sun was rippling and splitting apart as its edge began to slide behind the mountains. It was an achingly deep red, burning the sky orange and creating a false pink dawn behind her.

'I'll find another one,' she said.

The colour was draining rapidly from the land, and the wind became suddenly chill. Liu attacked. With her shadow weakening, Octavia blocked with her arms. The jolt of Lui's hard sole made her still-healing hand ache. She bit her lip to avoid crying out, but saw that Liu's hazel eyes had seen the wince. The woman was concentrating her attack on Octavia's right side, yet was clearly tiring as well. Each landing from the rising kicks scuffed up the earth, so that her feet were obscured by it. Octavia realised belatedly that this was deliberate, a way of hiding the first hint of an attack. She danced backwards, twisting and bobbing so that she only ever presented her stronger side to Liu.

'We could work together,' she offered. 'Unite the casket and take turns to use it. I'd use it first, to get us back to -'

'I think not,' Liu answered.

The shadows of the mountains were enveloping them now, making their figures indistinct. Liu had managed during a breather to twist her bundle diagonally about her, so that she had both hands free. With the sun gone, they were evenly-matched. Liu pushed up into the air, but Octavia copied her and pulled her back down with a leg hooked about her ankle. Close up, Octavia knew she'd have more chance against this girl. She might be able to pin her opponent to the

ground and stop the flying attacks. She tried a wild roundhouse punch, but Liu blocked it easily, twisting a forearm about Octavia's until her wrist was firmly gripped.

'This is your bad hand, yes?'

Octavia didn't wince. She tangled her legs into Liu's and pulled them over, Liu on top. Then she rolled, ignoring the pain in her captured wrist, and tried to get her left arm across the girl's windpipe. Liu bucked beneath her in a scissor-flip to loosen Octavia's grasp, and wiggled free. They both rolled to their feet, backs bent slightly forward, breath ragged.

'Spirits preserve us,' Octavia said, spitting it out like an obscenity.

'Gou shi,' Liu offered in Mandarin.

Men were approaching. They loomed up from the dusky valley, and the closest of them began to spread out, turning a line into a circle. They wore rough uniforms, and some carried staffs; their faces were set, the eyes masked by the lengthening shadows. Above their hidden gazes, red silk headbands were tied about their foreheads, each marked with one symbol or another. As the men came level with the women, half of them drew plain, unadorned swords from ancient leather sheaths and swung them into attack position. The edges of the blades glinted, even in the rapidly-vanishing light.

'I take it you've met these before as well?' Octavia asked, straightening her back and dropping into a slight crouch. Liu nodded, adjusting the knot that held her bundle tight to her back.

'Are they friends of yours?'

'No. I do not think they look friendly.'

Liu shook her hair free and took up a fighting stance, her back half-turned to Octavia.

'I think we should reconsider working together,' she said, as the soldiers rushed at them.

Chapter Seven

Both women held back, waiting till the soldiers were almost upon them.

'You see the one with the sabre, in the lead?' Octavia asked, looking left. Liu glanced briefly right.

'Yes.'

'I want the extra weaponry; leave him to me.'

Liu turned back, her arms swinging up to stop the first falling blow. She pivoted backwards, raising her leg to send a swift kick into her attacker's solar plexus.

'As you wish,' she said, dropping her raised foot and shooting out a shadowless back-kick to punch another man's kneecap out. As he fell, she noticed the character "feng" was drawn in thick black ink on his headband.

Octavia was already moving, dodging the first scything swing. She spun within the attacker's reach, so that her back was to his chest, and grabbed his sword-wrist with both hands. Then she had one leg out and was throwing the heavier man over, turning him about her torso rather than over her head, gripping his wrist throughout. She dropped to one knee, pushing it into his neck just enough to loosen his hold on his weapon. The heavy leather tunic prevented her applying a killing pressure, and besides, she had more attackers running towards her.

Liu saw Octavia rise from the ground, the snatched blade in her hand. She swung it twice, learning its weight, and then vanished as another attacker hid her from Liu's view. Liu pushed her elbow backwards into a man's face and threw herself up into a flying forward somersault. She tucked her legs in, then let them explode outwards. Both kicks found their targets.

Then something was tugging sharply at her shoulder, twisting her and dropping her to the earth. One of the soldiers had thick, clumsy hands underneath the silk rope she'd made of her bundle. As she wriggled to free herself, she felt the knot loosen. The weight of the half-casket dropping, hitting her at the top of her thigh. She threw herself backwards, grabbing the collar of the man's jerkin and back-somersaulting over him to slam him to the ground. Flipping back to her feet, she found the knot had loosened still further. Before she could adjust it, another soldier's sword was descending on her.

Octavia saw the blade arcing towards Liu's face and leapt backwards, twisting so that her own now-bloodstained sword clashed

with the attacker's. She had to put both hands on the hilt to stop his superior weight forcing her downwards. Without her shadow, she needed more help.

'Liu!'

Liu used the woman's outbent knee as a jumping point, leaping on to it and then over Octavia's head to bring her sole into collision with the soldier's face. Even as her foot shoved him downwards, she saw he wore the symbol "long" on his headband.

Octavia took advantage of the man's distraction to twist his blade from his hands, and slash horizontally across his face with it. He fell. The follow-through of the blade caught at Liu as she dropped back to the ground, catching her hand.

'Pok gai!'

'Sorry,' Octavia answered. She hefted both blades, synchronising her wrists so that they swung in rhythm.

Liu landed badly. The loosening bundle caught at her legs, and she tried to tighten it. Something was wrong. The weight was out, the spare material at the front too long. Another soldier was bearing down on her and she forgot everything but the need to defend herself. With the extra weight gone, she found herself rising more swiftly, sending a series of kick-punches into the soldier's breastbone. As he fell back, intersecting with one of Octavia's flying blades, Liu dropped to the ground and looked towards the unfinished Pyramid. The source of the fighters.

There was a figure standing on the flattened top of the mound. It was lit by flailing torches, the flames bowing and contouring to the singing winds. All in white, its robes flying and fluttering as the ghost of the tomb's had. Then she realised. If this was - as Octavia had suggested - the time of the interment, then this was no spirit. This was the living person, standing on top of her funeral monument. Watching them.

Octavia noticed Liu's pause, and ran over to her side.

'Are you all right?' she panted. 'We have a problem. These buggers don't stay dead.'

Prester John knew it was too late. If she'd been killed, if there were a body, then he could take it back to the Eleven-Day Empire and have it revived or re-grown. If there were even just a *trace* of the body. She'd be annoyed, of course, as she had been when the medics had tried to heal her visible scars from the Valentine's Day battle. But at least they'd have her back. This, though, this was more

insurmountable than death.

His foot shifted slightly, and something crackled beneath it. The spirit-woman looked up and, for a moment, he saw something else there. Her eyes glowed green and gold, her face filled slightly. Then the robes were folding away on themselves, fluttering and vanishing until he was looking at empty space.

'How about taking tea with me?' someone asked, from behind him.

He spun on his heel to see a woman standing there. No, not a woman; a timeship. Not even *a* timeship. *The* timeship.

He brought his hands up, sheathing his right fist in his left palm, and bowed deeply to her. As he straightened, he gave her a wry smile.

'Compassion.'

'Prester John.'

'Nice outfit.'

She was dressed in long robes, the wide sleeves hiding her hands. Her red hair was bound into a complex head-dress. Her face was pale in the darkness, although he saw she had orientalised her features. She gave him a minute bow.

'So you're the spider in this web,' said John.

'Obviously. And I *did* just invite you to step into my parlour.'

Prester John shrugged. 'That you did. Well, open up then.'

She pursed her lips slightly at his casualness, then let her arms fall to her sides. There was a moment of stillness, the outer image freezing, and then she silently split open. It was as if she were a single frame of film caught in the gate of a projector, the burning spot expanding into pure white light as the image was compressed and divided. John stepped into the light.

Instantly, it was void. A black absence that made him doubt he even stood on something material. He felt something fleetingly, like a passing brush of a butterfly's wings inside his skull. Another step and he emerged in what would, had Compassion ever truly submitted to the notion of it, have been termed her control room. He wondered how many milliseconds it had taken her to plunder his mind for the furnishings.

The walls were draped with imperial red brocade, embroidered with golden dragons and phoenixes, and stretched tight like canvases. The floor was made up of interlocking tiles of red and black. Instead of the console that would have been fitted inside a non-humanoform timeship, there was a table of finest rosewood, carved in bold curling patterns and set about with heavy wooden chairs. On it rested a tea

service of blue and white porcelain. Music, faint and gentle, drifted from beyond the wide circular archway that led to Compassion's interior recesses.

'Well, this is… nice.'

'I *can* be a gracious host,' she said. Her voice was disembodied here, seeming to arrive in his brain without his hearing it. It boomed a little, and he instinctively looked up. Where the ceiling ought to have been was a dome of night sky. Constellations twinkled and spun.

'Very pretty. Would you mind…?'

He disliked disembodied voices. They always made him look upwards, as if ceding his authority over himself to something higher.

'Shall I be mother?' her voice asked from beside him.

Compassion - the human form of Compassion - sat in one of the chairs. This version was the iconic one: a broad face with freckles and a down-turned mouth, hard eyes, red hair pulled back into a rough, thick plait and a comfortably rounded figure. She was wearing plain black combat trousers and a white v-neck top, its long sleeves pushed back to reveal her freckled forearms. A pendent hung about her neck, nestling against her breasts. A dark circlet of jade, pierced with a hole and suspended from a thin leather strap. Her feet, which he somehow always imagined in heavy boots, were bare and he noticed - incongruously - that the nails were painted blood-red. She caught him looking.

'People change,' she told him.

'I thought you used to say you weren't "people"?'

'How about "things change", then? Tea?'

Prester John sat in the free chair, draping an arm along its back. He took the cup from her and drank, holding the tiny bowl with his fingertips. The tea was at just the right temperature, the first clear taste undercut with a lingering hint of cinnamon.

'They say in many cultures that you should never drink nor eat when you find yourself in another world, for by taking part of that world into your body, you become bound to it. Tir-na-Nog, the underworld, the shadow kingdom. What are you up to, Compassion?'

'My immediate concern was to remove you to safety.' Her voice was carefully-modulated to sound concerned, but he doubted she meant it.

'Whose safety? Yours or mine? I was in no serious danger.'

'A white man in Beijing, when cultists are hacking down every foreigner they can find?'

Prester John didn't reply; there had to be some alternative agenda.

Her interactions with the Faction were limited and normally contemptuous. She saw them as mildly irritating, of more use for distracting the Homeworld from her than any direct purpose.

The simulacra of Compassion stood.

'You want to know what I'm up to. Come and see some of it.'

She led him through the circular archway. It was a foot thick and lined with smooth grey slate. Beyond he brushed through fine-stemmed bamboo, light gravel beneath his feet. The music grew stronger as they turned a curve in the path and emerged from the bamboo. There was a large garden laid out in front of them. Paths snaked lazily about, some laid with large, smooth slates as stepping-stones and others made of gravel. Light-boned trees dappled the short grass with shade, and the bamboo beds rustled in a gentle breeze. The ground sloped down to a small lake in which a heron stood, waiting to strike. High above, in one of trees, a crow chattered to itself. Two red-pillared pavilions were on the nearer shore, their golden roofs catching the simulated sun. The smaller contained a small band of musicians, playing slow summer tunes. The larger contained the Old Buddha, Ci Xi herself, sitting amidst a court of women.

Prester John gave a low whistle.

'Impressive.'

'Thank you. She's a stupid old woman, really. Highly suggestible.'

'And what suggestions have you been making to her? To declare war on the foreigners, perhaps? Or to send fruit to the besieged?'

Compassion gave a mechanical grin which Prester John doubted had anything of real mirth to it. He wondered how much of this image of her was controlled by the mind of the timeship, how precise its programming was. 103-Form timeships were more plausible, more careful to modulate their body language to suit their surroundings. Compassion denied such visual comforters. But then, she'd been a closed-off human being *before* the transformation.

'None,' she answered. 'She believes one of the retired concubines has made a garden in the grounds of her pavilions, to be placed at the Dowager Empress' disposal during these difficult times. I don't even prompt her to enter, just control when she leaves.'

Prester John looked at Compassion, standing barefoot on the gravel, her arms folded and her eyes on the distant ruler of the Chinese Empire.

'You're pretending to be her, aren't you? That's a lot of power.'

Compassion sniffed. 'It's nothing. I've just been making sure that certain events occur. Events involving your little Cousin. She,' she

nodded towards Ci Xi, ‘can start all the wars she wants.’

‘What do you want with Cousin Octavia?’

‘I think you’d better adjust to the idea of never seeing your apprentice again. Excuse me a moment.’

The sprite of Compassion vanished with what Prester John considered an unnecessary showiness, spiralling into a glittering cloud of pixels and then winking out. Down the slope, the Dowager Empress was settling herself in a gilded palanquin. An older woman in the group, in the rich robes of a former concubine, fell to her knees and bowed her head gratefully. Ci Xi spoke a few words to her then, having praised the woman, she was carried away. The old woman rose to her feet gracefully and strode up the sward, her feet clearly not restricted by the platform shoes of court. Her face was familiar, though tinted and tilted.

‘That’s *her* handled for the last time,’ she said, as she reached Prester John’s side. Behind her the garden was folding away. The dappling birches folded up like umbrellas, the pavilions slid soundlessly into the lake. The heron, apparently alarmed, lifted free of the ground with heavy swishes of its huge grey wings. The remaining colours bled away like a watercolour painting left in the rain, until the open gardens had become a plain white space with nothing but a line as a horizon.

‘And doesn’t the Empress of all China wonder why she can’t always find this garden, or why she emerges from a figure when she leaves?’ John asked.

‘You’d be amazed how little that woman wonders. Although I do reconfigure the external architecture to look like part of the Forbidden City. I just enjoyed disconcerting you by staying in my old form.’

‘Thanks.’

The moon had risen, but was a poor one; a tiny sliver of silver. The only light in the landscape came from the torches about the burial chamber. Outside that circle, the night offered only glimpses of shapes, fragile highlights. Liu crouched, casting about with her hands for her fallen half of the casket. Her eyes could make out little but the pale face of Octavia and the hint of her swords’ edges. She could perceive movement about them, shifting masses and dark absences.

‘What do you mean by “they do not stay dead”?’ she asked Octavia.

‘I mean that I damn near sliced that one’s head off, and then watched him get back up from the ground. Can you fight in this light?’

Liu rose. Her eyesight was adjusting, but not enough. She closed her

eyes and relaxed. She felt the weight of someone approaching her from the side, let her body tilt sideways and her leg rise into a snapping side-kick. Off the impact she leapt upwards to spin her other leg about in a roundhouse, which smashed into his side. She dropped, feeling the man's heaving chest beneath her knees, and her fingers twisted into his neck. She pressed a few nerve-points quickly, then sprang back into a crouch. Octavia whistled softly.

'He will not stay down for long, if what you say is correct,' Liu said.

Octavia stepped around her, moving so their backs were against each other again. She had better night-vision and didn't like what she was seeing. The man whose neck she'd hacked through, whom she'd all but decapitated, was about to attack again.

'Definitely correct.'

She felt Liu lift up into an attack at the same moment as she swung her sabres. The warrior grunted as he fell, but she already saw him pushing himself back to his feet. Redoubling her grip, she slashed upwards, across his face.

This time he froze. He did not fall immediately, but held there for one long pause, long enough for her to see black liquid welling across his face and his headband - sliced in two by her stroke - peeling away from his brow.

Then he shattered, hard shrapnel spitting at her so that she threw up an arm to defend her eyes from it.

Even as she scowled, she felt the swirl of air beside her and instinctively converted her raised arm to a blocking blow, deflecting the sword of another warrior. His blade caught at the shoulder-strap of her bag, and it loosened. Twisting on one heel, and stepping back to reduce the target she presented, she brought both blades up to cross and trap his. She followed through with a full spin, her right blade slicing across the forehead of the man. Even as he exploded, she was bringing both blades to bear on another attacker.

'Liu?' she yelled.

'Yes?'

'Aim for the headbands.'

'Pardon?'

'Headbands. We can work out the why later. I think we need to get out of here right *now*.'

Octavia felt the weight of her damaged bag slip on her shoulder, banging into the back of her legs. She struggled to adjust it whilst still holding a sword, and heard the material rip.

‘Pok gai!’ Liu yelled, and Octavia felt more shards hit them.

They fought back to back, until a space was clear to one side. Liu couldn’t think what was happening to the soldiers, only that her half of the casket was lying in the dust and she was gradually inching away from it. She did not want to reveal its loss to Octavia, however, despite their truce.

‘This way!’ Octavia shouted, her hand catching briefly at Liu’s sleeve, and they both made a break up the scree slope.

Octavia led, and Liu let her. The woman explained, between gasped breaths, that she had been studying maps of the area and had an eidetic memory. Liu’s legs were staring to tire, her knees no longer willing to move and her thighs pulsing with exhaustion, when Octavia paused.

‘Here… yes, here we are. There’s a cave.’

Liu allowed herself to be guided in, then heard Octavia settling herself.

‘Tomorrow,’ the white woman was saying, ‘I need to get back down there. I think I left something behind.’

Liu wanted to answer, but her body was already falling into sleep.

Chapter Eight

Liu woke with the dawn, the lightening sky rousing her from dreams of shadow-men, blood and the sea. There was rough grit digging into her side, and the smell of old smoke lingering in her nose from the silk pillow she'd made from her clothing. Opening her eyes, she saw the red-and-grey walls of the cave, faintly lit by a rose-coloured sky. Octavia perched at the edge of the cave, her body hunched up so that she resembled a crow more than ever. She must have watched all night.

Liu sat up, and the scuff of her body on the rough floor made Octavia start. She straightened her back slightly and clutched at the stolen swords. Her eyes were dark and heavily-lidded. Liu scrambled forward to sit with her feet on the edge of the cave.

From here she could see the plain laid out below them. They had fled northwards, and the Pyramid lay perhaps two li distant. Already movement could be seen on it, though too far away to be more than hints. Liu touched Octavia's arm, felt it tense up at her gesture.

'Here, you sleep for a while. I will watch.'

Octavia looked set to argue, for all that her eyes agreed with the idea, so Liu gently brushed her thumb against a point in Octavia's hand and watched the Westerner acquiesce. She dropped one sword at Liu's side, then crawled backwards. Even as her head hit the still-warm pillow, Liu knew that she slept.

Prester John and the Compassion-form stepped through the circular doorway, which was now no more than an archway hanging in space, and re-emerged in the red-lined room.

'You know,' John remarked, re-seating himself, 'a person might get to wondering why you bother to fold the garden architecture away when the Dragon Empress isn't here.'

Compassion's sprite folded herself into her own seat, sitting cross-legged on the cushion. She spent a moment rearranging the tea-things.

'The patterns and calculation for it all are stored in my memory. There's no need to maintain them when there's no-one to see it.'

'So if a tree falls in your forest when there's no-one to hear, it really doesn't make a sound?'

'If there's no-one to hear, there isn't even a forest.'

Prester John took another sip of tea. 'You're able to generate pretty much anything from nothing, aren't you?'

‘Not from nothing. I’m still held in check by the laws of thermodynamics, unfortunately.’

‘From the appearance of nothing, then. As far as your average human is concerned, it’s magic.’

‘You’re not an average human.’

Prester John inclined his head. ‘So this chair, this table, this cup, this tea… it’s all an extension of yourself?’

‘I import a lot of it.’

Prester John could see the fragments of the puzzle, and could almost see how to fit them together, but he knew he was missing some key piece. Compassion was taking an interest in a Cousin with witchblood, yet most timeships disliked active biodata coming anywhere near them. She was making sure Octavia arrived at key points, and using a lot of earthly power to do it. And Cousin Octavia, one of his favourites, was nothing more than a ghost.

‘I’m starting to think you’re building a time-loop,’ he tried. ‘One of the few ways to lose a Cousin permanently is to loop them.’

Compassion shrugged, refuting nothing. Prester John continued.

‘So this loop -’

‘More of a helix.’

Prester John nodded at her tacit admittance. ‘This helix. It’s of your own devising?’

‘Yes. I needed an unlimited supply of witchblood.’

‘So am *I* part of this loop?’

‘Sometimes. This time. A lot of times you leave your Cousin to rot. It’s not so much fun being the one who’s manipulated, is it?’

Octavia woke as the sun rose to its zenith. Liu was an outline in the mouth of the cave, her edges diffused by the sunlight beyond. Octavia scrambled over to her side, boots scuffing on the loose scree. The second blade, unthinkingly handed over, lay on the ground. The blood had dried black and hard, with sand and grit cemented into it. It was exactly where Octavia had left it.

‘Morning,’ she offered, shielding her eyes from the sunlight with her arm. She saw Liu had her face raised up to the light, eyes closed. Her hands, curled into slight fists, rested on her crossed legs.

‘Ng Ngon.’

There was a long silence, whilst Octavia tried to work out if she’d been insulted.

‘Pardon?’

‘I said it is a good afternoon. You speak no Cantonese or Mandarin?’

Octavia shook her head. ‘Wasn’t planning to be here long enough.’

Liu opened her eyes and looked askance at her. The sunlight caught in Liu’s eyes, creating glimmering gold in the brown.

‘You spoke Cantonese easily enough with Kuan Yin.’

‘She’s a timeship. You get close enough to one of them, and you hear what they want you to hear. We were speaking English to my ear.’

The other woman shrugged and looked back over the shimmering landscape. ‘There has been no sign of the warriors this morning,’ she said. ‘But we cannot simply wait for them to find us.’

Octavia lifted up the blade she had kept with her, and turned it about in the sun, watching the play of dark and light across it. She had sense-memories of hard shards spitting on her skin as she’d sliced into the warriors, yet the blade had cut into skin.

‘When you hit them, did you hit flesh?’ she asked.

Liu nodded. ‘But I saw what happened when you struck one across the brow. He did not fall to the ground as flesh but as stone.’

‘Seems a bit unlikely, doesn’t it?’

Liu looked away towards the Pyramid, hazy with the heat rising from the plain. She bit at her lip. Her hands slipped from her knees to fold into her lap, vanishing into the wide cuffs of her sleeves.

‘There are tales of old, of the Emperors who are buried in great mounds in the north. When they died, they would take into their tomb all they needed for the next life. Their concubines and their armies, and hell-money to pay their way. Emperor Chin, the first emperor, took ten-thousand men. Men of -’

‘Clay. He took ten-thousand terracotta warriors. The tomb was found, eventually.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Time-traveller. The whole thing works in every direction: back to the past or forward to the future. You know that; you’re working with Compassion.’

‘Kuan Yin has taught me a little. But I am not working with her.’

There was a long silence. Octavia tugged at her own lip, then licked at it. It was dry from the desert heat and the lack of water. She couldn’t afford to alienate the other woman at the moment.

‘So what else do we know?’ she asked.

‘You said to strike them on the headband, so what is important about the headband?’

‘I saw these men before…’

‘I too. In Beijing, two brought me forth from the fire at the Hanlin Yuan, yet last night others with the same character opposed me.’

‘Character?’

Liu raised her left hand to gesture across her forehead, and Octavia noticed pale silk wrapped about it in a rough bandage, the blood soaked black across the palm. She realised Liu was writing a symbol in the air in front of her third eye.

‘”Feng”, they had written here. The *fenghuang* is a symbol of the Empress, so I thought they were her men. But it makes no sense for them to be here now.’

Octavia squinted towards the rising sides of the Pyramid. The afternoon heat made the outline waver.

‘Unless there’s another Empress they’re protecting?’

‘The contents which Grieves brought back suggest so. I saw someone last night…’ Liu broke off, obviously reluctant to reveal more. ‘We cannot stay here for long,’ she said instead.

‘Agreed. No water, no food.’

Liu reached into her sleeves and brought out two small cakes, tiny pastries sticky with sugar. She passed one to Octavia, who bit into it. The almond paste within was ageing.

‘I am afraid I did not think to take any drink.’

‘We can get that from somewhere down there,’ said Octavia. ‘Workers need to be fed and watered.’

She leant forward and took up a handful of the fine, pale earth. She began rubbing it across the face of the blade, scouring the metal free of the grit and dried blood. She felt Liu’s eyes on her hands and looked up.

‘I definitely left something down there,’ she said.

Compassion’s sprite had brought rice wine over from a cupboard. It was sharp, burning in Prester John’s throat as he sipped it from the tiny porcelain cups. He sat back in the chair and propped one boot up on the table.

‘You know, a person might start to suspect you’re conserving resources.’ John looked up at the hemisphere above him. He recognised some of the constellations, ones which could never be seen

from Earth. ‘And I might start wondering why a timeship, and such an infamous one, would need to do that.’

‘What, you think we run our processes on ether and dark matter?’

Prester John grinned. ‘Now, you and I both know that isn’t true. Timeships have some link back to the Homeworld, some handy bit of technology buried deep in the heart of you, pulling lots of lovely energy through time and space to burn in your little light-show.’

‘True. True of my ancestors, anyway.’

‘But not you?’

‘Not me.’

He recalled nodding vaguely as one of the Fathers back in the Eleven-Day Empire had waffled on about the mythology of the timeships.

‘You’re transubstantiated from human flesh, not made of the Homeworld,’ he concluded, still gazing at the starscape, at the real Compassion. ‘You don’t connect.’

The sprite snorted, bringing his gaze down to hers. ‘I prefer to think that I connect to a lot more things than the Homeworld knows about.’

‘Yes, but in practical energy terms?’

‘Earth, obviously. It lacks the technological power of the Homeworld, but I’ve created a workround.’

‘And it relates to witchblood. Interesting.’

‘Oh, not just witchblood. Regular humans will do just as well. But the power runs out a lot more quickly, when it’s running in little linear lines. Witchblood provides years more energy.’

‘When you say “energy”…’

‘Chi, if you want to call it that. The life-force that’s tangled into every cell of a human being. I need a link to that energy, a symbiosis. It doesn’t kill them, but it sustains me.’

‘I do hate to ask the obvious question, but why are you telling me this?’

‘Because I’m not going to let you remember any of it,’ said Compassion. ‘I just feel like having a companion for a while.’

The air in the valley was clear, sharp like glass, so that every sound seemed magnified. They walked in silence, all concentration on their footholds, and their laboured breathing was deafening in the emptiness. Liu paused, as Octavia held up a hand to indicate that they should hold. Swallowing her loud breaths, she heard a brief, full silence. Then sharp notes rang out from the burial-mound, still a li

distant, as of hammers striking metal.

'Workmen?' she asked, keeping her voice to a whisper. Even that sounded too loud in the crystal air.

Octavia nodded.

They continued on, feet slipping on the bare slope, until they reached the flat of the plain. The sun had turned and begun its descent into the west, but it still caught at the skin. Octavia loosened the neck of her tight black tunic, though she had to keep its dark, silken sleeves down to protect her from the light.

They reached the fight area easily. The ground was scuffed and scattered with debris. Liu spotted a dusty silk that had been torn from her bundle the night before, and crossed to it, in the faint hope that her half of the casket still lay nearby.

'Look for shards with writing on them,' Octavia said, crouching to run her fingers across the remains. Liu wondered how the western woman would be able to recognise the ghosts of letters on the shattered fragments, when she did not speak nor read any of the languages of the Middle Kingdom. As her own fingers began to turn over the shards, she realised the marks were not writing as she thought of it. These were cruder, closer to cuts scored into the clay, and would be fairly easy to spot. Octavia could not read them, even if she *did* have some vague memories of learning the strokes that she'd absorbed from Liu, and Liu would have to work to decipher them. The broken form of many did not help.

Glancing away, she saw Octavia snatch up some heavy canvas with haste, pulling at it and then sitting back on her haunches despondently.

The sun was far in the west now, slating shadows across the plain. It must have been almost the same time that they'd arrived the day before, and the low sun revealed hundreds of scattered fragments across the area in which they were crouching. Liu gathered together the pieces they had found so far, bundling them into the fragment of cloth.

'There is too much for us to do this here,' she told Octavia.

The other woman nodded, then looked towards the burial-mound. Although the sounds of construction continued, there were no shouts coming from it. Her usually inexpressive face was scowling, and she licked her dry lips before catching Liu's eyes.

'I've lost my half of the casket. So have you, I think, from the way you were searching about earlier. It's starting to look like those warriors took it, and I want it back. So do you. So, we work together

against this enemy, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'I'll go and scrounge up some food and drink, you keep on collecting the pieces.'

Liu worked until the first edge of the sun hit the mountains, then bundled together her cloth and turned to seek out the cave. Octavia caught up with her just after the sun had slipped away entirely, water-skins slapping at her back and unleavened bread stuffed into her rescued bag.

After a hasty meal in which the bread tasted of the dirt on their hands and the water hurt their dry lips, they agreed to share the watching again, and Liu slept.

The days and nights turned with the world, and they pulled together the fragmented words. Liu worked calmly and almost silently until they had almost all of a chest-plate together.

'I think it is based on the oracle bones,' she said.

'Oracle bones?' Octavia briefly recalled an overturned shoulder-blade scoured with blood. She began trying to fit some of the headband pieces together.

'The bones would be thrown in the fire. As they were burnt, they would crack and fissure, and these signs would be read. After a while the advisors began to scratch the symbols on the bones themselves, to be sure of a welcome prophesy.'

Octavia held up a piece. 'This doesn't fit. The curvature suggests it should be here, but the notches don't line up.'

Liu took the fragment, her own dust-coated fingers brushing Octavia's. They were still unused to the way their witchbloods tugged whenever their skins met, like two magnets set to attract, and Liu caught Octavia's own disturbed gaze. Looking down again, she traced the partial marks on the fired clay.

'This is "long", the sign for "dragon", I think. Unlike the *fenghuang* I saw.'

Octavia took the piece from Liu's hand and placed it in a different pile. 'So we have two types of soldier. Two different allegiances, or two allies?'

Liu shrugged and bent back to her work.

Octavia would slip down to the camp every few days to liberate water and bread, and Liu cleared the stones from a flat area near the cave. Then she stood over it and wrote characters in the dirt with a

thin stick. Octavia watched, tracing the movements until she began to grasp their meanings. That was her skill; where Liu's lay in the language and careful construction of sense, Octavia's lay in pattern, shape and leaps of faith.

'There are stories of clay men in many societies,' Octavia said one noon, as they lay in the shade. 'The golem of Jewish myth, and the mud men of Abarat. There are even tales of a twentieth-century artist who kept a living homunculus in a wooden box in his studio. All clay figures brought to life.'

'How?' Liu asked.

'Through words. A golem can be created from thin air, from the immaterial, by reciting a prayer. But it can also be created by writing on its brow. Then it obeys the commands baked into it.'

'As these warriors do,' Liu said, propping herself up on her elbows.

'But what's the trigger?' Liu frowned at her, her brows curling into delicate scowls. 'The trigger. The spark that fires their life.'

'The words?'

Octavia reached forward, to run her narrow fingers over the shards. She had made patterns with them, shaped them into what she thought might be words.

'What do we have so far?'

Liu rolled to her knees, leaning across to trace her worn nails along the scraps of script. She grabbed her stick and scrawled shapes in the dust.

'This is *woman*. See the downwards stroke of it? That is on the bones and still used today. *Phoenix. Dragon.* This,' she traced a shape almost like a sword, 'is *protect* -'

Octavia grasped it suddenly, the patterns shifting into place so that she wondered at her failure to see it before.

'The shards Morrison found were from one of the missing warriors. Grieves must have shot one of them through the head as it attacked him. As if they awoke to protect the mummy. The mummy is the woman, the characters are the command: protect the woman.'

'So when we broke the headband symbols, they collapsed. Yes! That makes sense. But why only those two symbols?'

'Together they form the imperial court. The dragon is the male, the Emperor. The phoenix is the female, the Empress. Both are required for harmony in the land… perhaps both types of warrior are needed?'

'That doesn't make sense. I only ever saw ones with the "long" symbol, I think.'

‘And I “feng”.’

Octavia saw in her mind a serene face, one heavily-painted eyebrow raising. ‘Compassion. She’s been playing us both, pushing us towards or away from things to be sure we both ended up in that room at that moment. “Feng” for you, “long” for me.’

‘Why?’

Octavia put her hand over Liu’s, halting the stick that still idly draw symbols in the ground. They both felt it; a sparking, pricking tremor as their witchbloods pulled them together.

‘We share our blood. We’re bound, caught up in each other’s biodata. Compassion knew it. She drew us in and tangled us up for whatever reason, and she programmed those warriors to follow us. They only woke after I’d touched the casket, after my witchblood had interacted with them. And you know what that means, Liu Hui Ying?’

Liu could feel the singing of their bodies. She could tell her eyes danced with the same laughter that Octavia felt as she grasped the idea.

‘We can build our own,’ Liu spoke Octavia’s thoughts. ‘We can build them to be loyal to us both. We can fight to win the casket back.’

Chapter Nine

Liu tested the balance of the sabre, trying to accept it as an extension of herself. Her years with Gai had instilled in her the skills to disable and not kill her opponents. This metal, which sang with the blood it had shed, was not made to merely wound.

She caught the whisper of an attack and stepped back into fighting stance, raising her sabre to block Octavia's downward slice with the flat of her blade. She tried to side-step, twisting the locked blades down towards their sides. Octavia swung with the momentum and broke the lock. The blunt back of her blade slapped Liu on the fleshy part of the thigh, making her wince.

'Not good enough,' Octavia critiqued, close to her ear. 'You let me use your weight against you after the initial block.'

The Westerner stepped back, raising her sabre to the attack position. Liu copied.

'Again,' Octavia commanded.

They had spent two weeks on their respective parts of their plan. Whilst Liu had sketched pictograms in the earth, Octavia had experimented with creating creatures from it. She had found the now-abandoned mine where clay for the Pyramid had been taken. The trek, in the hot sun, exhausted her until Liu gave her the old cream silk jacket. Octavia abandoned her black with relief. Every few nights, she and Liu would venture down to the plain, gliding into the workers' camp to take slippery skins of clean water.

One afternoon, Liu had thrown down her stick and gone over to Octavia. Octavia had been kneeling with one leg outstretched to ease the pain in her knee. They had nearly been caught the night before, their dirty hands on the loaves of flat bread that sustained them. Octavia's mis-swung kick had caught not her opponents but Liu. Liu had struck back instinctively.

'Would you teach me the blade?' Liu had asked. 'I studied for several years under my si fu. He trained me in the secrets of his style, so that I can fly high and kick faster than your shadow. I can defeat you, for all your blade and your ghost fighter, but you are not my opponent. I want to learn to fight with your weapon. Will you teach me?'

'If you will teach me your shadowless fighting.'

So now they practised Liu's forms at dawn. Afterwards Octavia would sleep, whilst Liu watched for the enemy and worked on the

commands to encode into the warriors. After noon, when Octavia rose, Liu learnt the sabre in the hard sun. Then an afternoon working side by side on the words and clay, before another form practise in the dusk. Octavia watched through the night.

Two nights later, as the gibbous moon had bulged, both women had ached. Liu was early, Octavia late. Both had lived enough in houses with other fertile women to know that the menses could fall into synchronisation. Octavia had ripped her old black jacket into strips; they'd used some as rags, rinsed in the brackish water, and had wound others about their wrists to form guards. Liu's rose-grey trousers had become silken sashes tightly wrapped about their waists, crude scabbards for their sabres.

Sometimes, when they were laughing with success or fluid with confidence, Octavia found that her grip on her witchblood was sliding away. She would recall her cousin An Nuo solemnly cleaning her hands, as she picked at the grey clay drying like old skin on her arms. She had stopped expecting a warship to smash through the empty sky. Even assuming that Prester John had got through the siege, and found Cousin Bauderlaire, chances were that he'd written her off. And when her thoughts fell that way, Liu would reach over to her and rub the drying clay free of the fine hairs on Octavia's arms. Some evenings - hearing Liu restlessly dream of the chants and shouts of the southern harbour - Octavia would break from her watch to draw extra layers over the sleeping woman and sing her a song of her Guangzhou childhood from their shared past, till Liu settled.

Now Octavia feinted. Liu ignored the false lead, her own blade smacking Octavia's back. This time she doubled her grip on the handle and spun her feet, using steps from her own style to twist herself under the downwards pressure. Her legs kicked at Octavia's side, so that the woman dodged the roundhouse. And in that brief second, Liu bent Octavia's blade over, forcing the grip out of her hand.

'Good,' Octavia said. 'Now, again.'

They finished sword practise after a few more rounds, raising their blades in salute and bowing. Liu walked over with Octavia to her workshop. A head lay in the sandy soil, clay lids covering the sightless eyes. The model had been drying in the sun for two days, till it was bisque brown and shell-hard. Octavia rapped on it with her knuckles, producing a hollow note.

'This is good, yes?' Liu asked.

Octavia got one hand into the neck of the head and hefted it out of the earth. She turned it about, supporting its weight with her other hand.

‘Well, it hasn’t cracked, but I’m still not sure it’ll have enough tensile strength to be any real use.’

They walked over to a large stone, close to the entrance of the cave. The ground here was littered with shards of dried clay. Octavia set the head up on the stone, using smaller stones to prop it up. She stepped back and gestured to Liu.

‘Your turn. Remember to hit the forehead.’

Liu bowed and drew her sabre. After a preliminary pass to check that her range was in, she struck hard at the disembodied head with the dull edge of the blade. Both women shielded their faces instinctively as it shattered. Octavia lowered her arm first and inspected the remains.

‘I’m going to *have* to use a fire, Liu.’

‘That could draw the warriors to us.’

‘So we can’t do it more than once. Are the words ready?’

‘I’m not sure. I think so. But -’

‘We can’t sit here forever.’

Xu walked cautiously through the streets, heading towards the old night city as a full moon skulked behind the high, thin clouds. A truce had been called and held for the last two weeks, with only a brief burst of heavy fighting in the middle of it. He had waited out the days in the temple, the incense darkly colouring his thoughts and dreams. No news had come from Commander Meng, no hammering of fists on the gate in the night, but he had dreamt of burning bodies and flayed flesh.

As the war waited for the next command, he and others had grown venturous. Each day, they slipped through the gates and into the streets. Scurrying single-file like rats, they ran along the edges of the streets and alleys, searching for food to scavenge. On street corners, beside the shuttered or burnt-out tea-houses, where once the men had met to debate the day, they huddled to whisper half-heard gossip. The foreigners were marching on Tientsin. The foreigners had taken Tientsin. They were on the river. They were marching northwards. Then the crash of their guns was heard at the very gates.

Those who could were departing the city. The day before, Xu had heard that the night city was on fire. The heavy, oily smoke had boiled up from it, like resin from an opium ball, and there had been distant screams. This evening he had packed what little he had left into a bundle and offered up prayers to Kuan Yin before seeking his estranged son.

Everywhere the streets lay ransacked and smashed. The northern roads were filled with straggling people, fleeing in the last desperate hours, and he pushed his way through as he hurried westwards . Those who could not flee were waiting for the sword to fall on them all. The firing at the Legation echoed about the deserted streets, the whine of bullets faint above the growl of the few cannon. The city's siege of the foreigners was now being encroached by the besieging of the city itself, like a puzzle-box. The final hours had begun.

He had never ventured into the night city before. Signs hung advertising the houses' wares, the drugs or people, that could be bought within. Everywhere was shuttered, just like the rest of the Inner city, when it should have been waking ready for the night's trade. As he passed one open courtyard, Xu saw brightly-silked bodies swinging from the upper roofbeams within, like obscene cocoons. Death was preferable to what was about to smash its way into the city.

Xu had never sought An Nuo, never allowed him to be discussed in the house, though it had been obvious that Shen had kept in contact with him. The old maid had spoilt An Nuo as a boy, and may have known where he was living, but now she lay rotting in the ruins of Xu's home.

It caught at his chest as he thought on it, so that he had to rest again. He leant against the gateway of a burnt-out house, the brittle wood to his back, and closed his eyes briefly.

There were stifled cries approaching, and the sound of many people trying to be silent. Xu shrank back into the doorway, pressing himself into the wood. It could not be the cultists, the imperial military or the foreign troops. This hushed multitude suggested stealth and fear, a wounded animal crawling away to die in a dark corner.

A caravan of wooden carts, their iron wheels hastily wrapped in silk to muffle them, was trundling northwards. Each cart was heavily-loaded and drawn by a dozen men of the lowest ranks. Alongside the carts walked more men, looking about with trepidation. In the grandest cart sat an old woman, dressed in old blue clothes. Two younger women sat behind her, clutching each others' shoulders and hiding their faces. Xu could not see who was in the next cart, only hear the smothered wailing of grief and the whispered imprecations for silence. Then, as the old woman passed him with nothing but a scornful glance, he recognised them.

The Imperial Court was in flight.

The men drawing the carts were eunuchs, their normal status disguised, and the old woman was the Dowager Empress herself.

Reduced to the peasant woman she had once been, choosing life over honour, yet still she sat regally. Xu shrank back further, bowing his head so as not to glimpse the Emperor in the second cart.

'Hey, you! You can't stay there!'

A tiny woman emerged from the doorway. Her clothes were dishevelled, and she was clipping her hair back into a simple plait as she spoke to him. He bowed and stepped back into the street.

'I am sorry, madam, for the intrusion. I am seeking my son. Xu An Nuo.'

'He's gone, they're all gone,' she said. 'Just me now, and I go too.'

'You know him? Where did he go?'

'Don't know. Other men came looking too. He has no father, though.'

Xu noticed there was a bundle by her tiny feet, straps ready to be hoist onto her shoulders.

'You are leaving?'

'Nothing but jackals and long-noses left here now. It is death to stay.'

Xu looked up and down the street. He had no way of knowing where his son or Liu were. He stepped back and bowed to the woman. She was a madam, or had been one. He could see the faint red lettering on the doorway now, almost obscured by the slick, greasy ash.

'I was going to go north,' he said.

'So was I,' she said.

'I am old, but would you accept me as a protector?'

She shrugged, then lifted the pack onto her back.

'We should go now,' she said.

They looked back when they were on the high ground north of the city. Beijing's dark walls were obscured by grey smoke. Somewhere, high above them, a bird chittered a song and flew on. They did not look back again.

Liu and Octavia beat the clay, dampening it so that it didn't dry too quickly, then rolled it into smooth plaques. Liu used a bone, found near the burial-mound and sharpened into a point, to inscribe the characters onto the chest-pieces; Octavia moulded new heads, using her thumbpads to smooth the curves. She sliced a strip of clay off the end of a plaque with her blade, and brought it carefully over to Liu.

‘This will be the headband,’ she said, offering it.

Liu took the clay and wiped damp fingers over it. Taking up the bone pen, she explained the strokes to Octavia as they were drawn.

‘This long vertical stroke is the start of the “long” character, the dragon. It is the sign of the sun, of summer and of the south. Our attackers wore either “long” or “feng”.’

She added swift horizontal strokes, then turned the pen in her hand, offering it to Octavia.

‘I think you should write the other half. I will guide your hand.’

Octavia took the bone, and held it poised over the clay. Liu put her own hand over Octavia’s, lightly pressing to draw a series of strokes.

‘That is “feng”, and now we make “huang” the same way. They together make *fenghuang*, the bird which symbolises yin. It is the power of the moon, a symbol of winter and the south. Now the warrior who wears this will be equally loyal to both of us, for we have drawn these characters side-by-side. The characters on their chests bid them follow our orders and protect us.’

Octavia lifted the clay carefully, and Liu helped her fix it about the first of the disembodied heads. Then Octavia laid the unfired pieces in the sun to dry out. Both women settled in the mouth of the cave, watching the heat-haze blur the burial-mound, and picking the drying material from their hands.

‘We have some time yet,’ Octavia remarked. ‘The top of the Pyramid hasn’t been finished.’

‘No, it is almost done. The mound will be flat-topped. I think perhaps when the work is done, Kuan-Y-’

She broke off before Octavia could correct her.

‘- Compassion will be sending those men and warriors for us. She must know we are still here and want the casket.’

Octavia was silent for a long time. She *did* still want the casket, and a steady need drove her onwards, but she was becoming uncomfortable. When she got hold of it again, she would sever herself from Liu, cut the other woman out, and take the casket for herself. She was annoyed for feeling a twitch of conscience at the thought. The Faction was her only loyalty.

‘Well, we can do nothing more now,’ she told Liu. ‘The clay will have to dry, then we’ll fire it tomorrow.’

Liu brushed at her fingers, feeling the dust rubbing into the whorls of skin. With the warriors loyal to both of them, she knew she could gain the casket and use it to escape. She had considered, as she’d

worked out the characters, changing a few strokes to make the warriors listen only to her. But the weeks of practise had made her realise that she had to work with Octavia to reach their goal, and that the other woman would quickly notice any betrayal.

Octavia was staring towards the distant burial-mound again, a frown scarring her forehead. She had specks of clay caught on her cheek, drying to a pale brown. Liu reached over and brushed at it with her thumb. The other woman started, then relaxed into a smile. She took Liu's hand, traced the raised weal of the scar there with her own thin fingertips.

'It'll be a long night of waiting,' she said.

Before dawn, as the still-hidden sun lightened the sky, they walked back to the clay pieces. The faint light softened their faces and turned the world monochrome. Octavia sat on her heels, with her back to the north, and Liu faced her. They drew their sabres and propped the blades up, handles between their knees and the sharp edges cutting the sky.

'Ready?' Liu asked, raising her left hand, the recent scar faintly visible in the pregnant light. Octavia raised her own palm and nodded. As one, they thrust their hands towards the blades. Octavia forced her arm to relax as she drew her hand along the edge, applying a pound of pressure to break the skin. Liu winced, hurriedly repeating the gesture when her own first pass failed to draw blood. In the pre-dawn, the blood was black on white. They rose to their knees, clasped their bleeding hands together, and knew each other.

Liu saw Octavia's plan to betray her, and knew Octavia saw the same thoughts in her own mind. Octavia felt a familiar hurt in Liu; the promise of future pain. Childhoods melded. Octavia had a friend in the past now, an invisible companion who shared her joy, woe and confusion in a way her huge family never could. Liu had someone with her as she sat alone in her shuttered room, mourning a dead mother and a lost father.

Holding the western woman's eyes, as the sun's dawning light flooded colour back into the world, Liu saw that they were a perfect hazel; brown and green with glimmerings of gold. And she knew Octavia saw the same in hers, the once-dark brown pupils lightening and shimmering with green.

They rose to their feet, the sabres falling flat and their linked hands slick with mingling blood. Each piece of clay was brushed by them, the shared witchblood sinking into the bisque to leave dark mottlings.

They lit the fire with the full dawn, Octavia using the last of her lucifers to catch at the thin twigs, then nursing the flame into life with

her breath. Liu swiftly added the wood, increasing the size of the pieces until they caught in a fierce heat. The bisque models were already in the heart of the flame, propped up on stones so that they were as evenly-fired as possible.

The fire burnt all day, the smoke pale and faint in the strong sunlight. At dusk they pulled the warriors from the ashes, fitting limbs and heads to torsos. The figures were crude, compared to the warriors they had fought, with rough features. Only enough parts for three had survived the firing, the others cracking or splitting from the uneven heat. Liu traced the features that Octavia had moulded from memory. One had high, broad cheekbones, a square jaw and a long nose, with wide-open eyes and hair falling across his forehead. Another was shorter and rounder, with narrowed eyes and small, curved lips beneath a bald forehead. A clay queue hung from the back of his head. The third was smooth-faced and long-nosed, but with harrowed eyes and dimples close to his mouth.

‘The ones Grieves took woke up at my presence,’ Octavia said.

‘These are made to need both of us,’ Liu reminded her. Octavia nodded and brushed her own fingers over the chests of the warriors. The grooves of the characters had raised edges, and she could sense the way Liu had written them; the falling strokes or the swift horizontal slashes. She stopped beside Liu, her hand resting on the final warrior just as Liu’s did.

‘Is that it?’ Liu asked.

Nothing happened.

The warriors stood as impassive statues, the sun making the crude terracotta glow warmly orange.

Across the wide plain, crunching on the loose scree, came the sound of marching feet.

Chapter Ten

‘We cannot win this,’ said Liu, as she followed Octavia to wait halfway down the slope.

Octavia reached over to squeeze her hand. ‘We *can* win this. We are together.’

‘But without the warriors…’

Octavia shrugged. ‘We’ll just have to fight our own way.’

They stood side by side, stepping just a blade’s length apart. Liu was right, of course. The weight of their attackers made it hard to judge numbers, but it was a greater mass of soldiers than they’d faced before. Too many for just the two of them, weak with hunger and thirst, weary from their lack of sleep. Even at full strength, Octavia doubted they could win against this many.

Liu struck first, hurling herself forward into a flying, spinning kick. Her foot hit the side of a dragon warrior, slamming him viciously so that he stumbled into the path of Octavia’s blade. Octavia caught him across the forehead. She and Liu shot brief smiles at each other as man froze and shattered. Then the others were reaching them, and there was no more time for conscious fighting.

Liu was surprised to find how time expanded and contracted. The men moved slowly, her pulse slowed, and yet her responses were more rapid than her thoughts. The innate knowledge of where Octavia was, of how to work with her, was exhilarating.

Octavia was tranquil as her blade spun and smashed. In the poor light she was without the shadow she had relied on. Instead she had to trust herself. Herself and Liu. And it was easy now. She knew when Liu pulled her blade from its scabbard across her back, just as Liu knew that two phoenix warriors were closing down Octavia’s space.

Octavia changed her grip on the handle and struck one of the men with her elbow, catching him in the chest. He stepped back as his breath was taken, and then Liu struck at him, slashing at his bicep so that blade ground into bone. He released Octavia in now-nerveless fingers, and she hacked his forehead with her sabre, severing the headband. Even as he collapsed to dust, she was ducking another’s attack and striking at his side with her blade. Liu spun, wrenching her sabre free, and blocking a downwards slice from a dragon warrior at the same time.

As she went into a kick, her arms still raised and holding the warrior’s blade away from her body, she saw her blood-sister stagger.

A phoenix warrior had caught Octavia unaware, his weapon's edge catching at her side. The melee was too fast for her now, slipping like quicksilver beyond her perception. The sword had caught her high, glancing off her ribs to tear down her side and rip at the skin and muscle. The sudden pounding of her blood drowned out all other sound, and she was surprised to feel herself falling before the rising blade of the enemy.

Liu leapt upwards. The tense ball of her foot, with her whole angry bodyweight behind it, smashed into the man's forehead so hard that he burst. She landed in a crouch, her free hand catching at Octavia's arm.

Octavia rolled her head and grimaced. 'It isn't bad. Just hurts. Hurts a lot.'

The silk wrapped about Octavia's waist was bloody beneath Liu's hands. Liu looked about wildly. The warriors were forming a circle. Octavia straightened, pulling herself upright and tightening the bloodied sash about the wound. As she rested her weight briefly on Liu, she saw that the sleeve was dark.

'Your arm…'

Liu hadn't even noticed until then. The raw edges of the silk clung slickly to her skin, caught by her blood.

The warriors were approaching, the cautious circle closing tighter about the women. Octavia and Liu turned back to back, their shoulder-blades so close that each breath made them touch. Octavia swung her sabre in a constant low arc, every stretch stabbing her side pain. Liu considered dropping her blade; if they were to fight close, then she'd rather use her hands.

There were figures beyond the circle, reinforcements in the shadows, and Liu wondered what chance they stood now. One of the men was within reach of her, and she threw up an instinctive block as he lurched forward.

Then his face jerked back, and a heavy fist smashed through his forehead, shattering him. Liu stared at the warrior who had just destroyed his own kind, and then she saw it; he had a heavy jaw, and on his leather armour he wore a prayer she had carved herself.

Prester John was walking through a sluice gate. His boots tramped, along with those of British Rajputs soldiers, through a slimy trickle of waste. They'd been marching for days along dusty roads lined with bamboo, driving back occasional attacks from the Chinese military. Then the great walls of Peking had risen before them. The outer city,

where the peasants and workers lived, had been abandoned. Bodies had lain decomposing in the streets or the rafters of houses. On the higher wall to the Inner city, marking the point where the besieged Legation waited, flags swung limply.

On the surrounding soldiers' faces, Prester John saw trepidation. The Americans were attacking one of the gates to the Inner city, the Russians another, the Japanese yet another. The great bastions were under heavy fire, and yet here one British squad was sneaking in through what was definitely the sewers, for all it was called the Jade River.

Except that Prester John's memories were false, at least the memories of how he'd got here. He knew that much. Some part of his brain, trained by the Faction, had resisted whatever had reworked him. Now it was nagging at him about Tir-na-Nog and he had a sudden glimpse of a huge chamber, its roof open to the skies, a redhead smiling as she offered him tea and wine.

'They say in many cultures that you should never drink nor eat when you find yourself in another world, for by taking part of that world into your body, you become bound to it.'

Others stories told that the visitor would wake up in a dewy field, with fading laughter in his ears, to find that ten or a hundred years had passed. He could hear Compassion's voice now, as she'd pushed him out into the filthy channel and run her vibrating finger along his cheek, whispering that he'd forget.

'You've done this before,' he'd said, as he'd felt her twist his synapses into new routes.

'Many times,' she'd breathed, 'and not always to you. The human mind is a very flexible thing. Even if human thoughts aren't.'

Then he'd been stumbling along the sewer, as a distant whisper - like a breeze in a bamboo forest - had suggested Compassion's departure. At the head of the men, a captain had been ordering the troops to shift rubble and rotten wood from the inner mouth of the river gate, and then they'd been moving towards the Legation. Prester John realised he should be heading the other way, towards the station and Cousin…. there was a Cousin he had to find.

He heard shouts from the people within the Legation, the jubilation becoming a rumbling cheer beneath the still-singing bullets. Marines, battered and worn down by weeks of fighting, ran down into the gully to slap the relief forces on their backs and clasp hands with them. Prester John was hauled up from the bed and onto the pockmarked roadway, as many of the fresh troops shook their greeters off and made for the barricades. A new cannon was being hauled through the

malodorous gate, and a chain of men was forming to bring in the ammunition. In a few hours, the siege of the Legation would be over.

He had a cousin to find.

The sand-bagged entranceway, the walls surrounding it etched with bullet-marks, was opened. The relief forces harried through. Beyond was a wide courtyard, and everywhere there were people. The besieged were cleaner than John would have expected, but the air stank of the dead.

A cousin. He knew he had many cousins. No, he had many Cousins, as subordinates in the Faction. He was Father John of the Military Wing, and he wanted his fighters back. Cousin Baudelaire was at the station, along with Pendek and the other barrel-dregs he'd scooped up for the retrieval. But who were they retrieving? Cousin….cousin… Compassion had slid the woman's name from his brain, so that he couldn't recall more than a bird-boned face and distrustful eyes. Was this how it felt to be caught up in a retro-annulment, to have your memories of the Faction's presence expunged? Would he soon forget entirely, or had the training he'd undergone eventually pull the memories back to him?

'I *am* looking for someone,' he told himself.

He realised that a plump girl in rational dress, her hat hanging down from its ribbon and her hair loose, was at his elbow. She took his arm and pulled him towards a tree, where paper fluttered on a notice-board.

'There's a list of where people are billeted up here, if you need to find someone.' She patted his sleeve and then was away, taking the arm of a wild-running child and making organising sounds.

There'd been *his* organiser. Ursula. She was a fixer, a planner, the type to know everyone and everything and to plan for it. He had to find her and ….no, there was another Cousin. He looked blindly at the notice-board, not seeing any names that meant anything to him.

Walking away, he realised that a man was watching him from the bell-tower steps. The man was sat on the top step, one leg stiffly stretched out in front of him, with an open notebook on his crooked knee and a heavy walking-stick at his side. When he saw that Prester John had noticed him watching, he raised his hat and gestured.

John approached to stand before him.

'You'll excuse me not rising,' the man said, 'but the other doctors think I should keep the weight off the leg as much as possible. George Morrison, of the *Times* of London. How does it feel to relieve a siege?'

'I'm not… that is, I'm looking for someone. A cousin of mine.'

He saw that Morrison had dropped his gaze, his sharp eyes flickering across the ground, and felt something tugging at his ankles. Looking down he saw his shadow, its movements slightly at odds to his own. Raising his gaze, he met Morrison's sharp glare.

'You're one of *her* set, aren't you?' the journalist asked. He folded his notebook shut and sat expectantly.

'Hers?'

'The "cousin" you're looking for? Cousin Octavia?'

The name rang vague bells at the edge of his memory's hearing, but when Prester John tried to capture the thoughts they slipped away. He frowned at Morrison, who scowled back at him, squinting into the sunlight.

'I suppose you've come to make me forget her? To clean up the mess she left?' Morrison raised himself up, pulling on his stick so that he stood with its support. He glanced down at the stiff knee, then back at Prester John. 'Well, don't trouble yourself on my account. I intend to forget that young woman ever existed.'

Prester John stared as the man limped away. He should go back to the ghost station, collect Cousins Baudelaire and Ursula, make sure the traces of their time here were erased and then get back to the Eleven-Day Empire. But there was something he couldn't quite recall, some minor detail. He watched as Morrison slapped a soldier on the back.

'What young woman?' Prester John wondered, before turning towards his own world.

Liu spun to one side as the western clay warrior's fist slammed past her, to smash into another dragon warrior. Octavia, at her shoulder once more, gave her a savage grin.

'We did it.'

'Why didn't they awake sooner?'

'We can worry about that later.'

Then one of the remaining phoenix warriors hurled himself towards them, and Octavia threw up her arms to block him.

Liu caught glances of their own men, their children, in the melee. All three were working together. They were cruder in feature, their armour was less detailed, but they fought with more skill and co-ordination. As Liu blocked blows from a dragon warrior, one of their own grabbed him by the collar and hauled him backwards. She spun, and another of their men was in place to offer her a step up. She

stepped into his cradled hands and was flung into the air, then dropped, pummelling a dragon warrior back into the path of Octavia's sabre.

Landing, knees bent, fist raised ready, she realised that all of the enemy were destroyed or disabled. At least until they drew themselves back together. Octavia stood in the centre of the circle of fallen, her hitching breath revealing how much her still-bleeding side hurt her. She wasn't looking down, but up, towards the western horizon. Just clearing the distant mountains, and flooding the plain with silver light, was a full, large moon. Liu looked down to see Octavia's shadow flexing its weapon-arm.

Octavia gestured to the ground.

'Look at you.'

Liu looked. Her shadow stretched beside her. As she stared, one of its hands reached out to cautiously touch a wounded warrior. It shimmered across the dusty ground, moving as Liu stood frozen, to pull the headband from the warrior and rip it apart. As the warrior crumbled, Liu got the distinct impression that her shadow was pleased.

'Does this mean I'm one of you?' she asked Octavia.

Octavia paused for a moment. 'I think we're both one of each other's,' she offered, in a quiet voice. Then she sounded firmer. 'Now, while we have the advantage, let's get that casket.'

The three warriors saluted, and followed as Octavia led the way across the plain, Liu at her shoulder.

'Do you think we should name them?' Liu asked. 'If we are to command them, then we need to identify them. The western one? He looks a little like -'

'I know who he looks like.'

Liu skipped to draw level with Octavia, and took her arm.

'I am sorry,' she said.

'For what?'

'For his death.'

Octavia slowed, and let her muscles relax under Liu's pressure. 'He didn't die. Well, not in the old world, and not in mine. History will clean itself up, brush away the problems the way you'd sweep leaves from a courtyard.'

'Oh. That is good.'

'Yes. So, let's call him George. Hey, you! You're George. What about

the others?'

Liu glanced back, staring at the Han warrior. 'He can be An Nuo. My cousin. He always protected me. I hope he too lives.'

'And the third?'

They were still arguing over the name of the mixed warrior when they reached the workers' camp. It was deserted. The tents where the men had lived, the real, human men, were empty and abandoned. Bread lay uneaten, and dying fires smouldered as ashes in the pits. As they approached the Pyramid, they saw that the earth about it had been recently disturbed; a darker stain lay along the foot of the structure.

'The warriors buried them,' Octavia said, suddenly feeling sick. The screaming pain in her side was making her nauseous, or at least that was how she rationalised it, but she knew that really she'd lost her callous shell somewhere in the wilderness.

She slumped to the ground, and Liu commanded their warriors to stand guard. Then she disappeared into the shadows, leaving Octavia hunched in the dust.

'The entrance on the south face is still open,' she reported, on her return. Octavia held out her hand, and Liu pulled her back to her feet.

There was a shallow path descending into the earthworks at the centre of the southern face of the Pyramid. Inside, the passageway was stone-lined, with grooves gleaming with oil where the seals had yet to be rolled into place. There was light within: the glow of lanterns. Voices could be heard, hurried whispers echoing up from the chambers. They took the path downwards side-by-side.

The first chamber was empty, but sumptuously decorated with gold and paint. Octavia recalled the descriptions Grieves had given, and was not surprised to see that the passageway to the inner chambers was also unsealed. The voices came from within.

There were three daises, each rising higher in grandeur. Before each stood an altar, flanked by lanterns whose oil reservoirs were as high as the two men tending them. The men were filling the giant jars and trimming wicks to create everlasting lanterns. Beyond the open, embossed copper doors to the innermost chamber was a high bier, with silk falling softly from it. There a jade suit, sewn together with golden links, glowing warmly on top. The burial chamber still awaited its occupant.

But before the doors, waiting behind an altar with her arms folded into her dark green sleeves, was Compassion. The woman raised an

eyebrow as the two warriors entered the room together.

'Well, you've never tried this before,' she said.

Chapter Eleven

They stood in silence, Liu and Octavia watching Compassion as she watched them. Around them, yet distant as if in another world, the two workmen finished their chattering work. Without dropping the gaze of the other women, Compassion commanded the men to leave.

'You killed the other workers,' Octavia said. Liu couldn't tell if there was accusation in her voice or not.

'They would have died of starvation anyway. There weren't enough provisions for them to reach the nearest village. I can't see why you should take the moral ground with me, anyway. You're the one who's in a death-cult.'

'A cult of ritual. No different to *your* methods, really. It's all about cause and effect. Duplication of results.' Octavia sheathed her sabre in the sash about her waist, wincing as the material tugged at her side. 'You said we've "never tried this before"?'

'Yes. You really think this is the first time I've stood here, waiting to see which of you will come into the parlour? Or even the hundredth?'

Liu moved now, taking a step forward as if to shield her wounded companion. Her arms swung loose and ready. 'Kuan Yin, is this about reincarnation? Are our lives to be weighed? Is that what you were guiding me towards?'

Kuan Yin smiled. Almost.

'I was guiding you towards this. Both of you. Everything was about getting one or the other of you to this point.'

Octavia had stepped forward so that her shoulder brushed Liu's. The loose cream of her sleeve caught at the black-rimmed tear in Liu's, and both women's eyes tightened briefly. Hurt one of them, and the other felt it like a knife under the ribs. She didn't need to look at Liu to know what she felt, didn't even need to be touching her.

'We'd already worked that out,' she told Compassion. 'You're going to use the "chess" metaphor, aren't you?'

'I was thinking more of a game called "go",' Compassion offered. 'Chess would work, of course, since you both like hierarchical power-systems. But then you'd start talking about pawns and queens and kings, as if who's in charge actually matters. No, you're the empty spaces of a go board, and the warriors are the two armies. Black and white, equally weighted. Each side trying to push back the other, but all the time really just eating up the empty spaces until all the moves are proscribed. You might as well sit down. You're both injured.'

Compassion gestured to the three thrones in the chamber. Liu glanced at Octavia, saw the wariness she'd already felt from her. The hazel eyes, sparking gold and green in the lamplight, were wide with caution. Liu smiled her reassurance, then walked up the right side of the dais, aware that Octavia matched her pace-for-pace along the left.

As they reached the middle step, Liu unfurled herself, rising swiftly and flying at the red-haired woman. There was a glimmering, like light on water, and Compassion had moved. She hadn't stepped aside; she just wasn't where Liu was. Liu twisted to correct her flight as her kick failed to connect, and stumbled as she landed.

Octavia was by her instantly, helping her rise with sure hands. She looked at Compassion, then upwards towards the embedded gems gleaming in the dark ceiling.

'We're inside, aren't we? Caught in your womb.'

'Typical of the Faction. You always have to go for the biological imagery.'

It answered so many questions, though; why, for example, the Pyramid had been so hard to locate. A timeship reworked the weft of space-time around it so that it became inconspicuous. Its mathematical processes altered its surroundings, just as Octavia's - and Liu's - witchblood did. That explained why Octavia's searches had failed to find this place.

She let Liu guide her to the highest throne, where the backing-screens were of pale jade and the cushions were of golden silk, embroidered with dancing white lotus-blossoms. Liu sat, curling one leg up under her body, but Octavia perched on the edge. Compassion's sprite moved over to stand before the altar in front of them.

Octavia watched her - *it* - carefully. Now she knew it was just the sprite of the timeship, just an image provided to give human senses a focal-point, she knew she couldn't expect it to reveal much in its reactions to her. It was as contrived as the throne, or the stone walls, or the jade.

The jade casket was an extrusion of Compassion.

That was why it had clung to her skin like ionised silk after a thunderstorm. Why it had felt familiar and yet alien, and had meshed her to it, and it to Liu, and Liu to her until they were all bound to each other.

'I thought timeships didn't like having witchbloods inside them?' she asked.

The sprite shrugged, a feigned indifference that could well have been real. 'As a rule. No. But -'

‘But you’re an exception, yes.’ Born of human stock, bred to… well, breed; the mother of a new race of War-engines. Yet here she was tinkering about with puzzle-boxes. As Octavia watched, Compassion unfolded her sleeves to reveal, heavy in each palm, the halves of the jade casket. Boxes within boxes. A giant game designed to lock Octavia and Liu into place. Each half of the casket glowed from within with a bright, fierce and familiar energy.

She recognised it, at last. Her witchblood, and Liu’s, pooled and contained within mineral walls of Compassion’s mathematical modelling. A battery charged with the coiling energy of wild biodata.

There were only stories to explain where the witchblood came from; hints that it was the hybrid biodata of humans and Homeworlders, a genetic inheritance of a shared past. Just as Compassion was a human being who’d been transformed into Homeworld biotechnology. But Compassion had no need of that Homeworld for her energy. She had humans. She had the energy of the witchblood, and she had two willing fools who’d walked into her and given her what she needed.

It was a time-loop, Octavia realised, and one with some built-in redundancy. One or other of the two women would always reach this point, would always be used to power the timeship, would always end up charging the jade battery. Stretched over millennia and flexible as silk, the loop allowed Liu and herself the illusion of autonomy so that neither of them even noticed being captured in its filaments. It was their own behaviour which caught them; each time their own ambitions led them into the pattern, and each time the inimical nature of their blood - their fear of losing themselves in the other - made them fight to the death. They were trapped in a wheel of their own forging.

Liu had sensed faint, intangible surprise when they had walked into the chamber together, and Kuan Yin had admitted as much. Between them they had weakened some tiny link in the chain that bound them to the wheel.

‘Have we ever been here before, together?’ Liu asked.

‘Only once,’ said Compassion, as if it were the most trivial thing in the world. ‘But you turned true to yourselves before you got this far. Witchblood to witchblood can’t help itself.’

Betrayal.

‘You only need one of us?’ Liu asked, then realised. ‘No, you can only carry one of us.’

‘But which one? I can give you the immortality you’ve been looking for, remember. I *am* what you’ve been looking for. Time is

meaningless inside me. A hundred years have passed outside this chamber, by the way. Those two servants ended up being sealed in by my warriors. Your clay sons and mine have fought for a century already, turning themselves back into dust.'

' "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday, which passes like a watch in the night.",' Octavia muttered.

'Still the good religious girl, Octavia? It doesn't matter to you whether it's the incense of the high church or all that blood-and-bone in Faction Paradox, does it? You're scavenging around the edges of the War, frightened of shadows. And I can offer you just about anything…'

As she spoke, the walls of the chamber turned to red sand and cascaded away, whispering as it poured through metal grates and into an abyss. The sky folded, the constellations turning and changing. Damp moss sprung up underfoot, and the beaten copper doors of the burial-chamber turned to waterfall, sparkling and dancing in tropical sunlight. The jade throne they'd been sitting on became a fallen terap tree. Around them other trees sprung up, racing towards the now-pale blue sky. Orchids bloomed in the new forest's depths, splashes of vibrant colour growing in the rich, dead matter. It smelt of decay and fresh water. Wildlife rustled in the shadows, the flutter of disturbed bats in the treetops and the whoops of monkeys somewhere in the distance. Stood in the centre of the clearing, Compassion's sprite held the two halves of the casket towards them.

Even as Liu was glancing about in surprise, the world was changing again. The trees arched upwards, joining together to become a stone canopy. A flock of parakeets, acid-green against the foliage, screeched and turned in mid-flight. Their bright feathers vanished into the wall, creating stained-glass images that patterned the flagstones with underwater light. Brass and steam roared up to replace the waterfall, and a distant bell began calling a warning.

'No?' Compassion asked.

Behind her, the cloisters vanished, replaced with the constant swell and tug of a grey-green sea. The bell echoed around the bay, returning as the sound of a steamboat chugging into harbour. The throne was made of bales of cloth; heavy Manchester cotton wrapping fine Chinese silks, bound and ready for voyage. On the water, hundreds of tiny junks bobbed and swayed. The smell of frying seaweed drifted from beyond, along with the cries of street vendors. In the sky above, mackerel clouds were peppering a bright spring morning. An offshore breeze ruffled the women's hair.

It was Guangzhou harbour, as Liu had last seen it. She had run

down to the docks on that final, blustery day before she'd gone north. Her sandals had slipped in the fish-scales smeared on the dockside, and she had sat on a bale and eaten sticky sweets with the children who ran errands for her father. Compassion - the *sprite* of Compassion - still stood before them, each hand holding half of the casket. Take it, and she could have whatever world she wanted for as long as she wanted.

'Choose. Only one of you need accept the offer.'

Liu felt Octavia twitch. Their thighs were pressed together, warm against the prickly cotton bale, and she could see Octavia trying to deny Compassion's expectations. Liu's arm ached, the blood still trickling from the slash to merge with her partner's. The ends of the blood-stained silk that bound Octavia's injured waist were fluttering in the sea-breeze, flicking in and out of Liu's vision, and they reminded her of something. Someone.

The ghost.

The spirit of the tomb, which she had taken to be a Han ruler, was either herself or Octavia. Its form changed and flowed because it was in a state of flux, depending on who became the desiccated, used-up husk on the bier. She understood that, and saw the shared knowledge slipping between herself and Octavia as their blood pooled together. The mummy had been clasping the casket tightly, clinging to it and seeking it out once it was taken from her. Whoever took the "offer" would become that spirit.

How often had their hollow ghosts drifted through the burning shell of Beijing, searching for the very object that doomed them?

She rose, to stand on the wooden jetty. Octavia stood too, trying not to wince as new blood welled from her wound.

'You only need one of us -' Liu began.

'- every time, you only need one -' Octavia continued.

They were on either side of the sprite. It didn't need to look between them; Compassion was everywhere. Every breath, every move. She could see them from every angle. But, as Octavia and Liu both realised, she was only paying attention to what she considered to be their one weapon in this place. She was only paying attention to Octavia's shadow.

Liu's shadow ducked and spun and, just for the slightest of moments, the sprite flinched. Liu and Octavia grabbed and pulled their halves of the casket from each hand.

Octavia could feel the call of it; the energy inside the jade, the witchblood twisting like chi, running widdershins as it feasted on

itself. Her and Liu, all tangled together like a discarded skein of wool, until only a blade could break the knots. It was their power, captured and harnessed and caught again and again and again as they ran about like clockwork soldiers. And Compassion was the hand that wound the key, set them in whirling motion and enjoying their predictable, clumsy battle. Octavia's skin rested lightly on the coiling surface, as lightly as if it were the wind from a butterfly's wings, but she felt it connect. She possessed it. It possessed her.

Liu could feel Octavia's heart beneath her hand, the pulse thumping through the jade and up along her own skin till it roared. They had been led here by this woman she had once thought a goddess. Led from a frantic, anxious desire for life above all else. *They* hadn't mattered. Only their blood, their strange tainted blood. Compassion was a goddess no more, just a chi vampire intent on draining their life-force. Not once, but again and again and again, trapping them in a loop of their own greedy devising so that the woman-who-was-a-ship could live. Yet… yet… looking up she saw Octavia's eyes, jade reflecting on jade.

Every other time, they had failed. One or the other had failed. Died in the desert dust, or been smashed down in this mausoleum. Betraying each other, stabbing each other in the back or the heart, like wounded animals lashing out. Then the winner had taken her dreadful place in the burial chamber, and been drained to a mummified husk by the hunger of the timeship. Woken only to see her earlier self stealing through the shadows in search of the same casket of secrets that had eaten her.

'NO!' The thunder rumbled across the harbour, clouds piling high in a sudden gale. The sprite vanished, and then the world melted. Colours bleached to bone, and bone turned to liquid. The sky raced away from them, the jetty was gone, and they were surrounded by nothing. No up, no down. Nothing secure, nothing tangible. Nothing to push against. Nothing to cling to.

Nothing save the glow from the two halves of the casket in their bloodstained hands. And Compassion's voice, clear and resolute, like a goddess calling out her commandments. Her sprite reappeared, smoothly gliding with them as they tumbled through the emptiness.

'You have to choose,' she urged.

Liu turned to look at Compassion. Octavia turned to look at Kuan Yin. Their eyes watching her, they reached out with their free hands. The hands, bound by bloodstained rags from their pact, caught at each other without thought or hesitation. Their eyes turned back towards each other, forgetting the all-seeing timeship, and they smiled. As one,

they brought the casket together.

The interlocking sides twisted and slid into place. Then they were pushing at the lid until it fell free. The energy, the energy of their own blood, was released from the casket. It returned to them, drawn to itself, and slid into every pore and cell. The witchblood danced, with a dreamy 3/4 time as it spun and bobbed about them, weaving and reworking new patterns in a blaze that was purest healing white and yet somehow not blinding. Liu could only focus on Octavia. Her pale skin was translucent in the light, so that only the curl of her smile and the green-gold of her eyes were clear. She was laughing, and Liu found herself laughing too. Octavia wanted to clasp Liu to her, to waltz about this strange, clear world. Liu's dark hair swung as she laughed, and her brown-gold eyes were wide with delight. Yet Octavia knew she didn't have to grab hold of Liu; Liu was already in her grasp, as she was in Liu's. The seed of yin caught in the swirling eye of the yang, and the growing speck of yang in the heart of yin. Sun and Moon. Water and Earth. Phoenix and Dragon.

They were gone.

Epilogue

Compassion swore in a language that used as many swift, guttural sounds as possible. Her voice reverberated about the empty interiors, and chased itself into the shadows.

The jade casket had been sustaining her for thousands of years, containing and controlling the boiling energy of the witchblood. In time the jade would dull, the energy transformed into actions or matter, until it became no more than a beautiful shell. Then she'd rematerialise the Pyramid in 1898, and start the players in their clockwork dances again. They'd jerk and twitch and sometimes stumble along the uneven way, but they'd always whirr along as planned. Whichever of them was left, after the battles in Beijing or on the plain, or crawling from the primal cave with the other's lifeblood sticky on her blade, would be bound in silk and cocooned in jade. Sometimes they railed against it; sometimes they were so weak that they sank gratefully onto the bier. But they always came. Their questing fingers would take up the jade and slowly, softly, their energy would be absorbed through it and into Compassion until nothing was left but the husk of them for Grieves to find.

She could always find two new witchbloods. It wasn't as if Octavia and Liu were the only two owners of active biodata in the history of the Earth. The bastard hybrids of the Homeworld were lurking everywhere that there were human beings. Nephel DNA, triggered into activity by trauma; normally an emotive longing to unmake what had been made. It wouldn't be hard to find two more. She needn't even stop at two, if she could be sure of keeping her energy source hidden from the Homeworld.

Except that there was a broken strand now, a place where the careful design was weakened. Once the pattern was flawed, it would become easier for others to slip through the net. She looked up at the starscape she'd painted on the ceiling, her own interior reflection of the universe.

Out flew the web and floated wide,

The mirror crack'd -

'Bugger that,' she said.

She could start again, or she could try something different. She'd already tried living with travelling companions, but they *did* insist on perceiving her as human. They'd see emotional symbiosis where she only saw an exchange of power. They didn't understand that she'd been remote by nature as well as by nurture. No, she would start

things differently next time.

Grieves' eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. His lashes were gummed together with fresh sleep, and hot, thin metal cut into his hand where he held the storm lantern; the only focus for him. In its swinging light, he caught glimpses of the red sand and silver scrub. Towering over him was the crushing weight of the Pyramid, a menacing silhouette against a midnight sky. Zhong was chattering to him as the man scurried to keep up. The words made no sense, but he saw how Zhong tried to detain and distract him. The workmen were up to something.

Suddenly, his sluggish mind caught at a word and he realised that Zhong was talking in English.

'- not important. A peasant superstition. I will tell them to disperse and get back to their bedrolls unless they wish to lose their jobs -'

Grieves ignored him. The men were by the seal of the Pyramid, crowding about it. Were they defacing it? Plotting to abandon Grieves' party here rather than open it? He strode to the back of the crowd and raised his lantern high, ready to exert his authority.

Sitting on the huge rock, the seal covered by long flowing robes, was a woman. She had one bare foot raised, its sole curving to the stone, and the other swaying lightly. Beads of sandalwood and gold cascaded in strings about her limbs and neck, and he glimpsed the milky curve of a breast outlined by the white silk. White blossom sang in her dark hair, and her tears dropped like petals. She looked up briefly at him, as if she were staring into his soul, and he saw the movement of universes in her eyes. Her thick lips curved into a half-smile, and for a moment he thought she winked. Then she was fading, fading, gone. Nothing but a hint of cinnamon and lotus-nectar in his nose, the echoes of her whisper in his mind.

'I'm afraid,' he thought he'd heard say in a voice like water, 'this journey will bring you sorrows, not knowledge.'

The world jolted briefly, like the crack as a phonograph needle skipped. Before him the workers were crying out, their voices rising ever higher, as they wailed the name of a goddess.

But Grieves was tired, woken for nothing, and he went back to bed shaking his head. So tired that he'd thought there'd been something there, sitting on the seal.

The tomb, when the workmen reluctantly opened it the next day, was empty. The everlasting lanterns had gone out.

Author's Notes: Warring States

Spoilers, sweetie.

BOOK ONE

The Dragon Flies - the dragon is yang.

Chapter 1

Page 4

The Thirteen Day Republic, along with Cousin Octavia, first appeared in *Faction Paradox: The Book of the War*. History suggested that an anarchist cult like Faction Paradox would in turn have its own splinter groups. So just as the Russian Revolution became a lengthy civil war between the Red and the White Communists, Faction Paradox had their own splitters. We'll be coming back to that.

Peking, the old attempt to write Beijing in western script, may look archaic if not positively reactionary. In fact, when we switch to Liu's point of view, we switch to using Beijing. Language matters, as you might expect in book about anarchist time-travelling voodoo cults.

Page 6

You can see a tiny ivory wand for tickling eyeballs in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

Page 7

The mustachioed captain is never named, but he was Captain Halliday, who was stationed in Beijing during the Legation Siege and received the Victoria Cross for his actions. He's a distant relative. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Stratford_Tollemache_Halliday

Page 8

Aleksandr is shortened in Russian to Sasha. There's a main character called Sasha in *Doctor Who: History 101*. And a minor one called it in a *Short Trips* story. If you find a character called a variation of Aleksandr in my work, just presume he looks like the young John Cusack.

George Morrison, the man who died twice, is a real historical figure. The only fictional element to his life story as covered in *Warring States* is the presence of Faction Paradox. Oh, and in real life he didn't have a spear head removed by Dr Bell. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/

George_Ernest_Morrison

Chapter 2

Page 11

Oracle bone script is real. Examples can be found in the British Museum's Chinese gallery.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oracle_bone_script

The Great White Pyramid of Xi'an is a rumour that first emerged in the 1940s. http://www.unexplainedearth.com/xian.php

Page 14

The jade burial suit is based on these http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jade_burial_suit

Chapter 3

Page 17

Glinyaniye muzhchini nye dolzhni paboyatsya = clay men hold no fear

Page 18

The red headed mummies of Tarim are real. Unlike the fictional mummy here, the red haired mummies were buried in graves. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/a-meeting-of-civilisations-the-mystery-of-chinas-celtic-mummies-413638.html

Page 20

"All things are ready, come to the feast. Come for the table is now spread" is Octavia's mantra, and is from an 1895 hymn, and ties to the idea that Octavia is rooted in her old time. http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/a/t/a/ataready.htm

Page 22

Turning left at Tientsen is a play on Lennon's explanation of how the Beatles found America: "we turned left at Greenland".

Chapter 4

Page 26

The "Righteous Harmonious Fists" is a more accurate translation of the "Boxer" cult's name.

Chapter 5

Page 29

The Red Lion Square ghost footsteps are a mashup of London ghost stories. The footsteps are actually further west, near Senate House. I did a lot of research on London whilst writing the tour of the Eleven-Day Empire and I think I tangled these together.

http://ghostsofsenatehouse.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/field-of-forty-footsteps.html

http://www.curufea.com/doku.php?id=faction:factiontour

Page 33

Faction Paradox's train navigates the worlds of ghost stations. I've always been fascinated because they are very physical manifestations of lost worlds. So the old British Museum Tube station featured in a prequel to *Warring States*. More recently, I finally wrote about the Necropolis railway, whose facade I used to see every week, in *Sherlock Holmes and the Indelicate Widow* http://magslhalliday.co.uk/?p=1836

Page 34

"Kansu braves" and "bannermen", the Chinese Muslim troops and the Manchurian Banner troops, were just two of the various Chinese armies involved in the Boxer war. An early title for the book was, in fact, *Eight Nation Army* after the fact there were eight foreign armies and around the same number of Chinese armies involved in the war. There was also an early attempt to have a running joke with titles of escalating size (Town, City, Utopia, Nation/State).

Chapter 6

Page 35

"it's like the Sepoy mutiny all over...". The "Sepoy mutiny" of 1857, now known as the Indian Rebellion (or First Indian War of Independence), had left a strong cultural legacy on the British Empire. Even a cursory look over the military action of Britain between 1850 and 1901 shows that a lot of it was actually around protecting imperial actions. The nomenclature angle was one of the things that drew me to the period. In the West, what happened in China is still called "The Boxer Rebellion", but "Boxer War" is probably a closer name.

Page 39

"Dusty bones and ancient pots" says a disapproving Morrison, echoing Willie Scott's dismissal of Indiana Jones' obsession.

Page 41

"Sir, the enemy has commenced firing" is, reportedly, a genuine comment and a classic piece of British military stoicism. Although not as good as the reputed exchange about Lord Uxbridge's leg: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Uxbridge%27s_leg

Chapter 7

Page 41

The Doubtless Fourth Wing of Faction Paradox is a branch that can only be inferred, and was something I put in *The Book of the War* based on the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. The plinth is now used for temporary art installations. At the time of writing, these notes it was filled with a ridiculously large blue cockerel.

Page 43

"Never grow old, never die" is one of the numerous vampire references in *Warring States*. This is half of the tag line to 1980s vampire movie *The Lost Boys*.

Eventually, I filled out the idea of chi vampires (as seen in the 1980s movie *A Chinese Ghost Story*) in "The Bad Blood Diaries" in *Bernice Summerfield and the Vampire Curse*. http://www.bigfinish.com/releases/v/bernice-summerfield-the-vampire-curse-177

Page 44

The Eight Immortals are popular Chinese figures - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight_Immortals

Page 45

It's possible that, when Octavia suddenly expected Morrison to make a move on her, I realized that I'd developed a bit of a crush on Morrison myself.

Chapter 8

Page 47

Jacobs and Hale, the male academics, are a shout out to Naomi

Jacobs and Kelly Hale who have both acted as sounding boards, beta-readers and were all round supportive during this novel's development.

Chapter 9

Page 52

Effie, Octavia's sister, falls ill in 1883 which is a nod to when the wonderful *Erasing Sherlock* novel that followed *Warring States* and was set in that year.

Chapter 10

Page 57

The flashback is set, in part, in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Did I mention it's one of my favourite museums? http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/

Chapter 11

Page 63

The Forbidden City really does house a large clock collection: http://www.chronometrie.com/fc/fc.html and it was impossible to resist using it in a book about time travel.

BOOK TWO

The Phoenix Dances - the phoenix is yin

Chapter 1

Page 64

Liu Hui Ying's name roughly translates as the wise willow.

Guangzhou is the better transliteration of Canton (just as Beijing is the better transliteration of Peking). In the same way that Octavia is an outsider to the British Legation, Liu's city of origin makes her an outsider in Beijing. She is Cantonese rather than Manchu, and Guangzhou was a Treaty Port (a Port forced to open to the British after the First Opium war).

Page 67

The Hundred Day Spring, or the Hundred Day Reform, was an attempt by the Chinese Emperor to reform China. It came to a bloody end, as his mother staged a coup and publically took the throne as the

Dowager Empress. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundred_Days%27_Reform

Chapter 2

Page 72

The spirit road is a feature of prominent Chinese tombs.

Page 74

Kuan Yin is called “she who hears the cries of the world”, and is the Buddha of compassion. She is most commonly depicted with peach blossom or lotuses, but may also appear carrying willow. There are several good examples of statues of her in the British Museum. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guanyin

Page 76

I wrote this in 2004. Going through it now, in 2013, the stone statues that get closer when you can’t see them made me laugh.

Chapter 3

Page 77

Both Octavia and Liu are hating the confines of the formal wear they are in.

Page 81

Both “Pleasure of the Bitten Peach” and “cut sleeve” are Chinese euphemisms for being gay.

Page 82

The Red Lanterns were the female cadres of the Boxers: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Lanterns_%28Boxer_Uprising%29

Chapter 5

Page 89

The Po Chi Lam clinic in Guangzhou was run by Wong Fei Hung, a folk hero, doctor and martial artist, famed for his “shadowless kick”.

Chapter 6

Page 97

The symbolism of the crow appears several times throughout Book Two. In Chinese symbolism, a two-legged crow is seen as a symbol of ill-fortune and magic.

Chapter 10

Page 114

The previous ransacking of Beijing was during the Second Opium War, and caused the imperial court to flee. Biographies of Ci Xi, the Dowager Empress, suggest the destruction of the Summer Palaces hardened her anti-foreigner stance.

She did, allegedly, continue with a masked party, despite the fighting in the streets around the Forbidden City. And she really did like to dress as Kuan Yin, goddess of compassion.

Chapter 11

Page 118

The Sorceress of the Wooden Bridge Inn is a Chinese folk tale, as are fox spirits: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huli_jing

Page 121

“Wound up and ready to play” is a phrase from a 1970’s children’s programme, *Camberwick Green*. “Here is a box, a musical box, wound up and ready to play. But this box can hide a secret inside. Can you guess what is in it today?”

Book Three

Te - or De - means “inner strength”, among other meanings: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_%28Chinese%29

Chapter 1

Page 125

Way back in Book One, Chapter 1, Octavia complains that Cousin Ursula won’t share the Homeworlder talent of being able to speak and understand any language. And that casual reference finally pays off here.

Chapter 2

Page 128

Taroc is card game played with the Tarot pack. Because there is no

way the Faction would be playing Texas Hold'em.

Chapter 3

Page 137

Morrison was wounded in the leg attempting to rescue someone crossing the Jade River. This and the other version on page 142 are rather more gory than the injury actually was.

Chapter 4

Page 142

Sadly, the different treatment of the dead based on their race is historically accurate.

Page 144

The navigator has gold-tipped fingers to increase conductivity so he can manipulate the controls through touch. This was written three years before the first iPhone, and a few months before Google Maps made layered mapping part of our everyday lives.

Page 145

The train crash is based on survivor accounts of the 2004 Ufton Nervet high speed derailment, especially those of a man who was dragged half out a window beneath the train. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ufton_Nervet_rail_crash

Chapter 5

Page 147

Prester John had made a casual appearance in *The Book of the War*, and is based on medieval myths that inspired actual quests. I came across him during research into early middle eastern religions (none of which appeared in *Warring States*). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prester_John.

Chapter 6

Page 153

"fortune and glory" is another nod to Indiana Jones.

Chapter 7

Page 160

Ci Xi did send baskets of fruit to the besieged Legations.

Chapter 8

Page 168

The clay homunculus kept in a box in an artist's studio is Morph, an early Aardman animation: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morph_%28character%29

Chapter 11

Page 184

The forest clearing is another forward nod to *Erasing Sherlock*.

Epilogue

Page 187

Out flew the web, and floated wide... is from Tennyson's poem The Lady of Shallot. The epilogue suggests that Compassion has had enough of using time loops or individual human's energy to power herself and that maybe she'll come up with something different now. So this novel is clearly set before Of the City of the Saved... in Compassion's timeline.

This was another conceit of the series: that each novel was set earlier than the previous one. So the events at the end of *Erasing Sherlock* trigger elements of *Warring States*, and the end of *Warring States* triggers elements of *Of City of the Saved...*

Quite how we intended to maintain that conceit, I have no idea...

Author's Notes: The Jade Casket, or the secret of immortality, unlocked

The jade casket, in mythological terms, contains the secret of immortality. In *Faction Paradox* terms, it contains huge amounts of chi energy. Chi is, in many ways, like the Force in *Star Wars*[1]. It is an energy which is in all living things, part of a human's connections to the earth, and the better one's chi flows through one's body, the longer one lives (because one is in harmony, not conflict). Chi also flows around the world, being channelled or deflected by hills, rivers etc etc. Chinese dragon lines (highly focused channelling of chi through the landscape) are the equivalent of Western ley lines (something which will get mentioned at some point, obviously).

In Chinese mythology, a vampire drains not blood, but chi.[2] See, for example, *A Chinese Ghost Story* (which contains many of the visual images I want to create). In the *FP* universe, I'm not only treating chi as real, but also as something which can power a Type 102 timeship. The logic[3] runs thus: earlier timeships gain the power required to drive their calculations via a link to the Homeworld, as do the Type 103s. The Type 102, Compassion, is the only timeship to have a different origin - she is linked to the earth, via Laura Tobin, as well as the Homeworld. The Great Houses cut her connection to the Homeworld, perhaps as part of the attempt to get her to work for them. With the link cut, she needs another source of energy to survive. Her link to the earth enables her to live off chi energy. There is the obvious implication here that both her occasional human companions (Carmen Yeh) and the entire City of the Saved are merely batteries. Possibly her original intent with the City was to provide a permanent power source, but over time she's changed to become the benevolent goddess. Either way, at the time of *Warring States*, she is looking for a way of harnessing chi energy without all that nuisance of dragging humans around with her.[4]

Compassion constructs the jade casket. Jade, in mineralogist terms, is a classic lattice crystal. So, as with quartz etc, it can transmit power. Nothing of any appreciable consequence in electrical terms, but then we're not dealing with electrical power here. So Compassion wants to charge it up. She could just stick it anywhere on Earth and wait, but this is a touch random and she wants to build up a store of chi very quickly, without killing a single person. So she sets the casket up in the White Pyramid and leaves clues, knowing that a couple of time-active humans will get curious. She does indeed draw Octavia and Liu.

She then sets up the warriors, programming them to ensure the two women always reach the casket at the same moment. For this point on, the loop becomes self-perpetuating:

• In 1900, the casket divides, each half bonding with the woman touching it

• The women go back to when the pyramid was being constructed

• One or other of the women gets hold of the casket but is entombed - the other usually gets written out of history by the winner's witchblood. The warriors are entombed with the 'winner', their programming going into standby.

• In 1900, the casket is removed from the winner's hands and she is woken amidst the burning Hanlin. All she has now is the obsession with regaining the casket (a few thousand years entombed as a mummy whose chi is being drained will do that to a gal). She is the ghost woman seen drifting through the city and who is also responsible for one or the other woman reaching the casket.

Each time the loop is gone through, chi is taken from the people who come close to the casket. All Compassion has to do is pop in occasionally to play her part and collect the energy from the casket.

[1] Although without Ewan McGregor and his light sabre.

[2] This is not some sneaky attempt to get blood vampires in the Boxer Rebellion.

[3] Try not to go "ha!" at my using the word 'logic'.

[4] Possibly it is her annoyance with Yeh, as implied in *The Book of the War*, which led her to try this in China.

Prologue to Warring States

The following was first published in Faction Paradox: Warlords of Utopia (2004) by Lance Parkin...

The air in the Stacks races through the tunnels, pushed by the ghost trains rattling over the dead tracks. Posters for films that never were, and adverts for beauty products that give new meaning to "age-defying", flutter blindly. Occasionally, the icy air slams into abandoned platforms, where insubstantial suicides stand, clothes swirling around them as they stare into the abyss of the permanent way.

Deep in the Stacks, Cousin Octavia welcomes the intermittent blasts of air. She likes it down here, safe not only from surface-level War offensives but also from the tedious internal politicking of the Eleven-Day Empire itself. Down here in the Faction's huge repository of knowledge, beneath a bloodlit London, she could lose herself in research. And if people got lost in the Lobokestvian geography of abandoned underground tunnels whilst looking for her, even better.

Unfortunately, Prester John is good at remembering the way.

'You could visit me in Westminster,' he remarks as he arrives, swirling flyers for *The Defective Detective* in his wake. Octavia shrugs.

'I've found it,' she tells him.

In the city square the crowd gathered, jostling not only to get a good view, but for their eagerness to be seen by the officials. Four men and a woman knelt, hands tied and heads bowed. A mandarin of the sapphire button stepped forward, peacock silks as stiffly formal as the condemnation he was making.

'- are hereby executed, for the most heinous crime of attempting to disrupt the Most Exalted One's Heavenly Kingdom, for the circulation of pernicious and corrupt ideas promulgated by the heathen foreign devils, for -'

As he continued, guards hacked off the queues of the men, holding the plaited hair high. The woman's hair had already be shorn, and not gently. All five waited silently as the official finished his denouncement.

In the crowd, Liu Hui Ying felt the hand of her father tighten about her upper arm. He was scared, she had realised this morning. Terrified that his laxity, his trade with the foreigners, his schooling of her,

would lead to his own beheading. These five had been brought down from the north for this, but Chin Liang-Yu had been a school friend of Liu's. So now her father made her watch her friends kneel in the dirt for their ideas.

Five swords fell, the edges shearing through the second and third vertebrae, through the thick muscles and flimsy vessels of the throat. Chin's head rolled, tainting the dust with blood, until its force was spent and it came to rest staring upwards at Liu with something like hatred.

Walking back to the dockside factory, where her family's fortune had been made selling antiquities, Liu felt her jaw tingle with the promise of vomiting, her mouth filling again and again with the taste of it. She swallowed it down, urgently wishing she'd managed to close her eyes. Her father's new-found distrust of her education didn't yet outweigh her cheapness as a translator, and there was a new shipment of vases going to Britain. She set to work.

'Please, convey to your father my gratitude for continuing his business with us at this time,' Atkinson said. He took a sip of pai mu tan. Liu's father nodded with satisfaction as she translated.

'We are always honoured by your visits,' he said, then excused himself to supervise packing the crates. Atkinson took another sip of tea. Liu liked these moments, her chance to practise her language without being watched.

'How was the voyage from India?'

'Easy enough. We had an interesting party on board. Your father might want to contact them.'

'Really, how so?'

'It was an archaeological expedition, from Oxford, who hope to find the Great White Pyramid of China. I told them that it was just a myth, but Professor Grieves seems quite sure.'

'What is it this time? The stars aligned to bring down heavenly fire? Prehistoric germ warfare? Godfather Morlock's birthday?' Prester John is sidling through the room, letting his long coat brush against the precarious mounds of research material. Just reminding her that he can bring it all crashing down, make her go back to the fighting. 'Actually, that last one would be of some use. He'd be really pissed off if I threw him a party -'

'The Holy Grail.'

'Again? We've got a storeroom full of the things.'

'The metaphorical Holy Grail: live forever.'

‘Given that we’ve already given history the slip, why would we want that?’

‘Think about it. We give history the slip but it always catches up. Always. Remember the Noose?’

Prester John winces. ‘Yes, that was embarrassing. So, what’s the plan?’

‘I’ll need to mount an expedition into linear time to retrieve it. And I can only trace it to China. During the Boxer Rebellion.’

Prester John nods agreement. The distant rumble of a train swirls Cousin Octavia’s clothes about her, and her shadow dances.

The Night is Long, and Dreams Are Legion

The following story was first published in the Myth Makers *anthology series (produced by Canada's Doctor Who Information Network) in support of* Warring States.

George Morrison, late of Peking, stepped out of the chain station and into Guang Xu Bejing. As with all pre-Republic Chinatown Districts, the chains that linked them to the other Districts in the City of the Saved were only permitted to stop outside the city's towering walls. Morrison limped up the deeply rutted path and waited with peasants and camel-drawn carts to pass through Yungtingmen. A few tourists - two post-humans and a Maori family - waited in a separate line, clutching their red permissions to enter and staring at the white man in the Residents' queue.

From here it was a decent walk up through the Chinese city, thorugh Qianmen and along the purple-shadowed walls of the Forbidden City to his home. His knee was giving him gyp through, the phantom wound still shooting white twists of pain through the ligaments, and he resolved, as usual, to rest for a while at Wong's tea house by Qianmen. There was no bullet lodged in his leg, for all his knew thought otherwise, and that too he blamed on Faction Paradox. Her face, the face of their agent in his time, had been hovering there like a pallid moth when he died.

Except, of course, he hadn't. He had been resurrected in the City of the Saved, the enclave beyond the universe's end where *all* human - and post-human - beings were reborn immortal. He walked slowly up the incline, trying to shake free of his pointless anger. He let the familiar warm rising smell of sesame buns and the bitter undertow of opium welcome him after a day arguing in the offices of *The Original Times of London*.

Every Emperor and Chairman had awoken in ever-lasting Heaven to discover their own Immortal Empire had fallen after them. Each had brought their court with them, although gossip had it that Ch'in was still annoyed about the loss of his terracotta army, and each had set about recreating their world. Some supreme rulers had accepted they were not unique. Puyi, the Last Emperor of the pre-Republics, now worked as a gardener in Kubalai Khan's great pleasure grounds. Others were intractable. Each had their own Districts with their own capitals: from the Kubalai's Ta-Tu, to the Great Hall of the People in

Mao 1 and the New Imperial in Pearl Empress 8. And each District, each massive sprawling Empire, was in Soho had been to London in the scale of the City hence becoming known collectively as "the Chinatowns". With death - and war - impossible, the Chinatowns enjoyed a complex and ever-shifting game of political chess.

Morrison, seeking a refuge in his personal hell, had taken up his old job as correspondent for the *Times of London* and moved to his favourite District to report on the intrigues. The First Republic District had asked him to relocate there, but he had felt vaguely foolish living in a street named after himself. Now he passed through the Qianmen and automatically sat down at his favourite table at Wong's.

'Ah, Doctor Morrison! How are you this day! Son! Bring Doctor Morrison's tea!"

Wong sold teas and tisanes from every District: delicate jasmine blossoms grown on a shoreline; dark bitter leaves from within the Manfold; or one of a hundred thousand teas from within the Chinatowns. Wong had come to recognize Morrison's mood, and offer him tea accordingly. If the leg were bad, it was a customized black smoky blend.

'Doctor Morrison?' an English accented voice asked.

The phantom wound was throbbing, its insistent pain like a second heartbeat, so that he scowled as he looked up. In front of him, looking totally at ease in an Edwardian traveling suit, was a Great Detective. Behind him stood a rather rakish Watson. Morrison cursed: not only was it a Holmes remake, it was an unpopular Roxborough one.

'I'm not a doctor anymore,' Morrison offered. 'If you have come from my wife-'

Morrison had woken on Resrrection Day with a young scar in his thigh and a young woman's face in his mind's eye. He had still smelt incense and gunpowder. Still tasted the horsemeat. Still heard the crack of guns and the screams of the baying Boxer mob as they cut down anyone in their way. Finding himself alone in what appeared to be a London railway terminus hotel had been disconcerting.

It had been nothing to the shock when his wife found him. Everyone came back alone, in an imago created by their own-self image. Many had come back as they had been on their deathbeds, so Morrison, with a clear memory of the Boxer bullet that took his life, was still in his adventuring prime. His wife, a wife he had never even met let alone married, was an old woman. And there were sons he hadn't even conceived of yet, as tall and as old as him. His wife had memories of him dying in an English Edwardian seaside town, not blood-drenched in a makeshift hospital in Peking. If he had died in the Boxer

Rebellion, they could never have existed. Yet they did.

They had tried, she from love and he from duty, but he'd said 'Octavia' when he should have said 'Jennie' and they knew she had married a different man. So he had left without a forwarding address.

'I believe,' the Holmes said airily, 'that you engaged us two centuries ago to seek out a woman who was *not* your wife?'

She'd had sharp bones like a bird and had plunged her hands in blood to perform rituals. Her shadow had danced through the horror and it was *her fault* that he had been resurrected out of synch. He had never lived to see the Chinese Republic that feted him. Never had his own blood family.

'It has taken us some time to look through the records,' the Holmes continued, 'and the Rump Parliament are notoriously secretive about their agents' whereabouts but we have checked quite thoroughly. You wanted to find one Cousin Octavia of House Paradox, neé Octavia Sutherland of Edinburgh?'

'Yes.' He recalled a drunken visiphone call, back when he had just left Jennie, and a minor monthly debit by the GDA from his credits.

'She doesn't exist.'

'Everyone exists. Even those damn cultists have been immortalized.'

'Not this one, sir. Normally, they come back, often several times over but she does not exist anywhere in the City.'

Morrison recalled a conversation, late at night when the fires of a burning library illuminating them. Octavia had talked of her desire for immortality, her eyes bright with fervour. And yet here he sat with an ever-lasting emptiness and she was no more than a memory of a wicked smile.

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- Dead Romance (Faction Paradox #0) by Lawrence Miles

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A full bibliography, and some annotations on the text, can be found at www.halliday47.freeserve.co.uk/mj3-ws.html. Or will when I get around to uploading it.

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